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MARCH

Cowboy Stories

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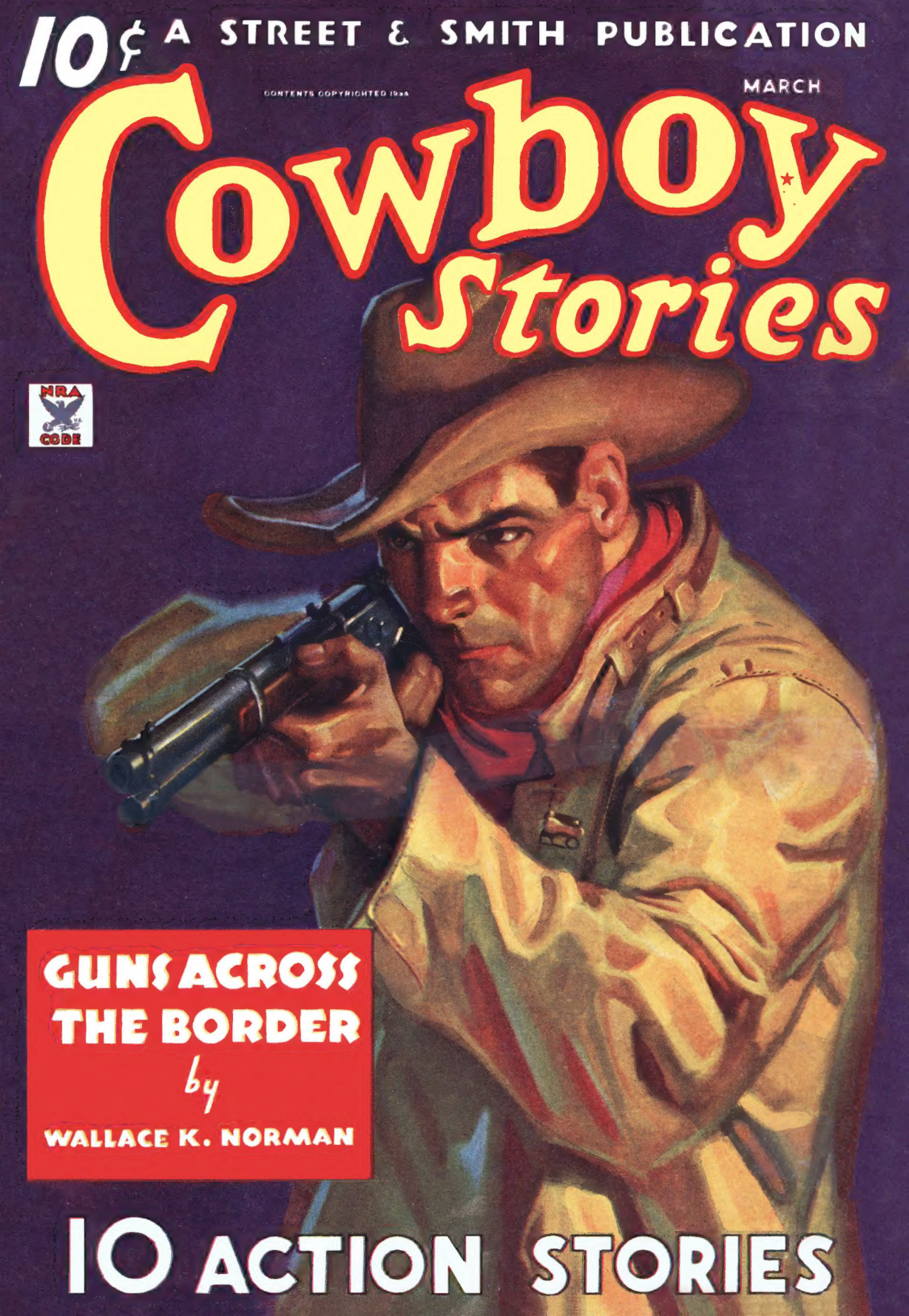
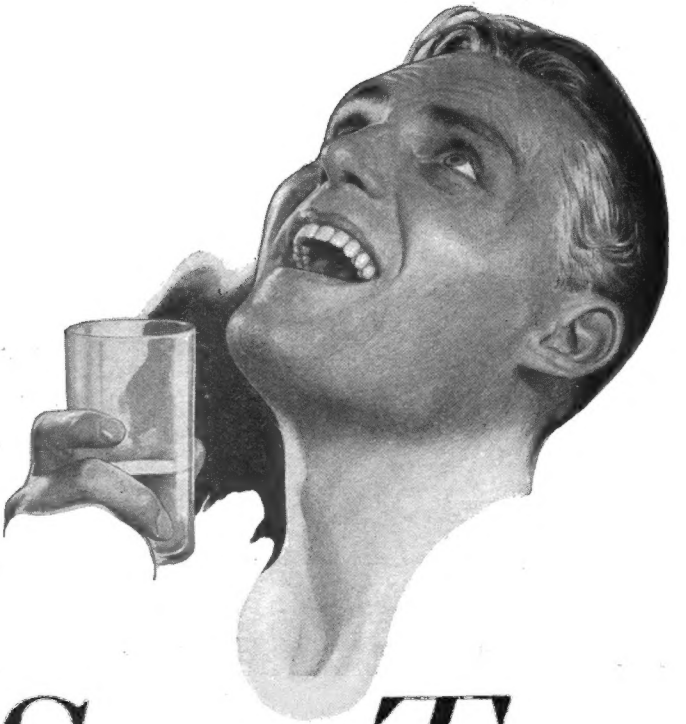


GUNS ACROSS THE BORDER

by

WALLACE K. NORMAN

10 ACTION STORIES



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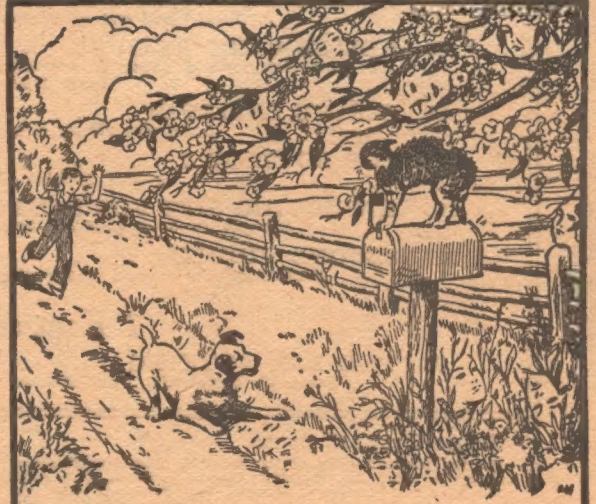

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COW—1

On Sale First Wednesday of Each Month

Volume XXVII
Number 3

Cowboy Stories

MARCH
1935

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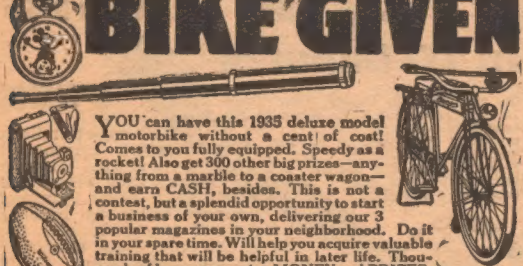

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GUNS ACROSS

—mean hell across the border, with a couple of hurricanes mixed in— for gun thunder is music to this waddy's ears, and he's from Texas!

THE BORDER

by Wallace K. Norman

"Shut your mouth, or I'll gut-shoot you!" Clay snapped, as Mendoza parted his thick lips for a yell that would bring the score of bandits hurtling in from the barroom.

SPRAWLED on the north bank of the Rio Grande, the sun-scorched little town of Mescal lay wrapped in utter quiet. No one was afoot. From a distance, it might have appeared to be a ghost town. It wasn't, however. The day was terrifically hot, and it was siesta time.

In the back room of Miguel Segura's down-at-the-heel saloon were three men. Segura, a fat, bulbous fellow, another Mexican, whose sinewy frame bespoke an active life, and, lastly, a rather cold-eyed, broad-shouldered young Texan.

"Ah, Señor Barlow," Segura exclaimed, addressing the Texan, "thees ees for you one beeg day! Do you know who eet ees you 'ave the honor to meet?"

Clay Barlow shot the second Mexican a fleeting glance and nodded tersely.

"Sure!" he said. "Felipe Mendoza."

"So, you see, Miguel!" Mendoza beamed proudly.

His features were coarse, his eyes small and black. A pearl-handled six-shooter swung from either hip, a costly, bespangled sombrero adorned his head, and on his feet were boots of the finest leather.

"You see? Even those who 'ave nevair see me before, know who is Felipe Mendoza, the greatest bandit in Mexico! Now, Señor Barlow, Miguel 'ave been watching you for a month, an' he tell me you are *muy valiente.* A man who can fight, a man who does not love thees Shereef Kinnsey. You 'ave no work, an' you need money ver' bad, no?"

The shadow of a hard smile flicked over Clay's face. "You're damn right I need money," he said. "What's your proposition?"

"Ah, *mi amigo,* that ees thee way to say eet!" Mendoza exclaimed. "Mendoza, the bandit, does not come to make foolish talk. No. Not weeth a hundred gringo officairs trying to catch heem! Leeson close, *compadre,* an' you shall be a rich man soon."

Several blocks down the street from Segura's saloon, Deputy Sheriff Mat Kinnsey sat mopping his streaming face. With the dripping deputy on this torrid afternoon was Captain Bill Draven of the Texas Rangers.

"Damn glad you got in, Bill!" Kinnsey swore feverishly, swiping again at his beet-red face. "Bein' single-handed here, I cain't do nothin' much. The bank at Seven Points was held up last week, Steve Porter was kilt, and I know two batches of guns was snuck across the river recent. But what the hell, I cain't be every place to once!"

Draven, calm of face, was in direct contrast to Kinnsey. Both men were large, but at a glance it was obvious that Draven was subtle, where Kinnsey blustered and stormed. Draven's eyes were level and cool. Kinnsey's shifty and uncertain; a man who doubted himself and every one else, but lacked the courage to press his doubts.

"It's Mendoza, all right, and he's gittin' help from this side of the line." The ranger captain nodded, tugging at his mustache. "Got word from the Mexican commandant down in La Paz that a revolution is brewin'. From what he says, the same gang that's runnin' guns is doin' all this raidin' and bank robbin' to get money to back their revolution. Now what was you tellin' me about this Segura and this feller Barlow?"

"Waal, Segura knows more'n he tells," Kinnsey snapped. "And that Barlow gent's in it some'eres, because he's been hangin' around Se-

gura's. Mendoza's gang is mostly greaser, but there's half a dozen white fellers in it, and I'll bet my chaw, that Barlow's one of 'em."

"Hmm!" Draven nodded, his eyes hard. Texas peace officers held small brief for Americans who aligned themselves with *bandidos* from below the Rio Grande. "Ever had any trouble with him?"

"Yes, by cripes!" Kinnsey replied. "Since he's been layin' around town here, he's had four-five fights. Last week he tore the Mesquite Bar to hell, fightin' a bunch of Double D boys. I started to throw him in jail, but——" The deputy's red face grew violently redder. "Waal, he's jest a no-good hellion," he growled. "Last job he had, out to the Bar 99, he got fired for pullin' his gun on the boss. Sam Hays, the boss, told me hisself."

"Bad feller, eh?" Draven nodded, getting to his feet. "You reckon Mendoza ever comes into town, Mat?"

"Hell no!" was the scornful reply. "That yeller skunk's got better sense'n to come across the line in daytime."

Draven stepped to the door, and spoke to the four rangers who had preceded him into Mescal that morning.

"Be right back," he grunted to the quartet drowsing in the shade. "C'mon, Mat! Let's go have a talk with Segura and this Barlow gent."

IN THE BACK room of Segura's saloon things had reached a sudden climax. Felipe Mendoza stood in the middle of the floor, a black scowl mantling his swart face.

"But for why you say no?" he demanded. "I 'ave take a beeg risk to come here to talk weeth you. You 'ave no money, you 'ave no friends but Miguel, here, who geeve you whisky for notheeng, an' I geeve you good money eef you come weeth me. These Rangairs 'ave come, an' eet weel be hard for us. But weeth you, señor, who everybody in Mescal know, eet weel be easy."

Clay Barlow, christened Claibourne Isaiah Barlow by parents long since dead, squinted at the floor through narrowed eyes. Having drifted from range to range for nearly half of his twenty years, his background, while colorful, was not exactly conducive to utter righteousness.

Besides which, like all of his breed, he was possessed of a natural wild streak. Hot-headed and fiery, he was ready for war at the drop of a hat. He wasn't bad, as the country measured such things, but all the essential materials were present in him. Good or bad, his future lay largely in the hands of circumstance.

"Nope," he said and shook his head. "I'm broke, and I ain't got no love for what acts as the law around here, but I cain't see myself doin' what you figger doin'."

"So?" Mendoza drew himself up to full height. "Felipe Mendoza does not beg for anytheeng. I 'ave ask you—*muy bien*—that ees all. An' don't forget, *mi amigo*, eef you tell to one person what I 'ave told to you——" The bandit snapped his fingers with a crack that rang like a pistol shot on a frosty night. "We do not do thees theeng until nex' week, so we weel 'ave plenty of time to know eef you make thee talk! Adios, señores!"

Mendoza crossed the room, opened the back door, peered cautiously up and down the crooked alley, then disappeared like a shadow. Clay winced at the thought of the money he had passed up and was suddenly of half a mind to call after the bandit king, but

circumstance was creeping upon him. There was the sound of a sharp scuffle outside the door which led to the barroom, and Clay, turning swiftly, saw Deputy Kinnsey thrust Segura's bartender to one side as the officer burst through the door.

"Jest what I figgered!" Kinnsey barked, needlessly whipping out his six-shooter. "Back here cookin' somethin' up, by cripes!"

Segura's fat face went gray, and he tremblingly cast a glance at the door through which Mendoza had passed but an instant before.

"Put your gun down, Mat," Draven said coolly, stepping through the door. "I reckon they'll come along peaceful. C'mon, boys; let's take a little walk down to the deputy's office. There's a couple of things we ought to talk over."

Kinnsey holstered his gun reluctantly, but Clay remained motionless. His face was flushed, and there was a fiery glint in his gray eyes. He had committed no crime. In fact, he just refused to join in committing one, and the injustice of the lawmen's demand made his hot blood boil.

"Suppose you take me," he suggested icily, his eyes boring into Kinnsey's. "I ain't in no give-up mood to-day."

Captain Draven's six-shooter came out of its holster so fast that Clay jumped.

"Suit yourself, hombre!" the Ranger snapped coldly, jerking Clay's gun from its holster with his left hand. "Start marchin'!"

Clay marched, and so did Segura, both well covered by the lawmen's guns. Down the street to the deputy's office they went, where they were backed up against a wall, full in the glare of a shaft of sunlight streaming in at the window.

An hour later, they were standing in the same place, but Draven and Kinnsey were sweating the most. The lawmen had asked a hundred questions to no avail. Through hot-headed stubbornness, and an intense dislike for Kinnsey, Clay kept his jaws locked. Segura kept quiet through avarice and fear.

Kinnsey swore finally, mopping at the perspiration trickling down his heat-bloated face. "I'll throw you two in jail till you do talk!"

"Ain't no need of that, Mat," Draven checked him. "I reckon these boys don't know what we thought they did. Turn 'em loose."

Bill Draven, who had spent nearly a score of years enforcing the law, knew when to be hard and when to be subtle.

"But," he went on while Kinnsey was trying to get his tongue from between his teeth, "you'd better stick perty close to town for a while, Barlow; we might want to talk to you again."

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Kinnsey at last managed to roar. "If you turn him loose now, that kioty'll shoot you in the back before sundown!"

"Wouldn't dast do that," Clay shot out hotly. "I ain't got no tin badge to back me up."

Draven only smiled half apologetically and tossed Clay's gun back to him. Turning on his heel, the puncher stepped out through the door. Segura came scampering after him, but Clay cut back between two buildings, away from the main street.

"Don't you see the play?" Draven grinned over his shoulder at the furious deputy sheriff as Clay disappeared. "He knows somethin', all right, but you couldn't get it out of him with a hot brandin' iron. This way he'll hang hisself. We'll keep

close tabs on him, and sooner or later he'll lead us plumb into Mendoza's nest."

Clay, scooting down a back alley toward the Rio Grande, was boiling with righteous indignation. Had Draven ordered him to get out of town, he'd have stayed in Mescal in the face of the entire ranger force. And by the same token, having been told to remain in town, he was leaving it. Circumstance was rapidly closing in around young Claibourne Isaiah Barlow.

REACHING the edge of town, Clay moved on toward the river, where his bronc was picketed. Unable to pay for stabling, he simply let the horse rustle its own feed. Pulling his saddle from the clump of mesquite where he kept it hidden, Clay tossed it onto his bronc and prepared to ride. Nor did he go furtively. If the rangers objected to his going, that was their hard luck.

A few merchants were padding sleepily back to their stores as Clay swung up along the edge of town. The rest of Mescal lay silent under the torrid rays of the sun. Then, in the flash of an eye, the little town was blasted from its siesta.

Down the main street swept a dozen men, riding like cavalry on the charge. Clay caught a glimpse of them as the riders, mostly Mexicans, pulled up their mounts in a dust-spraying stop in front of the First National Bank.

Clay, his face suddenly white, swerved back into town, but the thing was over in a twinkling. Mendoza and three others sprang from their horses and darted into the bank. There was a reëchoing burst of gunfire from within the little adobe building, and before Clay could reach the main street the four bandits sprang into view again. Heavily laden with money sacks, they sprang for their saddles, Mendoza yelling a foul order to make a ride for it.

The bandit gang, yelling like victorious Indians, whirled away from the bank. A shot rang out, then a whole volley rocked the heat-soaked afternoon as Draven and his rangers came racing up the street on foot. Two of the bandits pitched out of their saddles into the hoof-churned dust, and Mendoza, squealing like a stuck pig, clapped a hand to his shoulder. But that was all. The bandits swept out of town and, riding like the wind, headed for the Rio Grande and Mexico.

In a trice, the First National Bank was the center of a milling mob of aroused townsmen, in which Clay's bronc was caught like a steer in a chute. Their faces blazing, Draven and Kinnsey plowed their way into the bank, to return a moment later, bearing the dead body of the young bank clerk. There was an instant of silence, then an angry howl went up from the staring townsmen.

"It was that damn greaser, Mendoza!" a fat storekeeper bawled accusingly at the officers. "In broad daylight, too! Bet they was layin' right out here in the hills all mornin'!"

Kinnsey and the rangers turned away, cursing helplessly. There was nothing they could do now. Mendoza had crossed the river into Chihuahua sixty seconds after he had left the bank.

"Waal, I'll be damned!" Kinnsey, glowering wildly around at the crowd, yelled as he saw Clay. "What'd I tell you, Bill? Lookit him! I bet he was their lookout! Nail 'im, somebody!"

Draven, suddenly doubting his own wisdom in turning Clay loose,

and smarting under the derisive mutterings of the crowd, was in no mood for palaver.

"Throw up your hands, an' get off that horse, or I'll blow you off it!" he bawled at Clay.

Clay, realizing that he was stuck, started to comply with the order, but Kinnsey, wild with chagrin and lusting for vengeance, forestalled him. The deputy's gun roared, and lead cracked within an inch of Clay's head. Some one in the excited crowd fired a second shot, and in an instant two score of indignant, thoroughly aroused men were dragging their six-shooters to blow Clay out of his saddle.

Clay threw himself flat on his bronc's neck and rammed his spurs in to the hilt. The horse bolted wildly, scattering townsmen head over heels as he smashed through the crowd like a battering-ram. Lead cracking around him, Clay burst through the throng on the dead run, and as he hit the end of the street, he saw Kinnsey and the rangers grab horses from a hitching rack and start after him.

Clay shot another look back over his shoulder, and in a flash he was at the crossroads toward which he had been pointing for ten years. On one side lay law and order, as represented at the moment by a raging ranger captain and a vengeful deputy sheriff. On the other was the Rio Grande and a price on his head.

A disdainful twist to his lips, Clay lost no time in making his decision. With a wrench that nearly broke his bronc's neck, he swerved to the left and plunged down the steep bank of the Rio Grande.

Hot on his heels came the law, guns blaring. But Clay churned through the muddy waters of the tragedy-stalked old river and up into Mexico in safety. But the Texans behind him didn't stop.

Whipped to a frenzy by the useless slaughter of the young bank clerk, international boundary lines meant nothing to them. However, they pulled up with a splash and a volley of blistering oaths when suddenly a detachment of Mexican *provincial* cavalry burst out of the low hills fringing the river bank.

Clay, sighting the *provincials*, started to dodge, but the officer in charge of the detachment appeared not to see him. Traveling like a rocket, Clay hit the top of a low ridge a hundred yards beyond the river. Turning in his saddle, he placed his thumb to his nose and waggled his fingers at the furious men splashing back to the Texas side of the Rio Grande.

II.

FOR TWENTY minutes, Clay continued on through the hills until they petered out at the edge of a sandy, mesquite-dotted plain which swept endlessly to the southward. Far out across the plain, a receding pillar of dust was climbing into the sky. Leading down out of the hills, a wide path of fresh hoofprints showed in the sand, running straight as an arrow toward the distant plume of trail dust. Mendoza was returning to his roost.

Clay halted his horse and slowly rolled a smoke, one eye on the dust column which was rapidly fading into the heat waves dancing ghostlike over the empty Chihuahua plain. History had been made in that vast, lonely stretch of country. Bandits had come boiling up out of it; armies, dating back to bearded Spaniards in sweltering armor, had slogged wearily through its forbidding loneliness. Revolutionists in

tattered array had ridden over it, sometimes to victory, sometimes to beat themselves out against overwhelming circumstances—futile, forgotten whirlwinds in the desert.

Clay, dragging thoughtfully at his smoke, was little concerned with the shadowy procession of triumphs and tragedies of the past. He had problems of his own to consider. His past was behind him, his future a question mark. There was a sinister brand on his hide, but he didn't regret it. The wild streak in him saw to that.

He had done nothing wrong, but the law had seen fit to hound him, so to hell with the law! That his own hot-headed stubbornness may have had something to do with the law's attitude didn't occur to him, and, if it had, he wouldn't have let himself believe it.

With Draven and Kinnsey after his scalp, the trail north was most definitely closed to him. He turned in his saddle, cast a look back in the direction of Texas, and snorted contemptuously. And with that snort of contempt, his future ceased to be a question mark. He was already an outcast, and there was a restless something in his hot blood that clamored for action. So, with his hat pulled low to shield his eyes from the blinding rays of the sun, Claibourne Isaiah Barlow struck southward on the fresh trail that pointed toward the pillar of dust fading into the dancing heat waves.

Summer twilight had faded into night when Clay struck the end of the trail in La Paz, a little town a tributary of the Rio Conchos. Riding down the meandering main street, Clay grinned widely to himself. Border-born, he had spent plenty of time below the Rio Grande, and he spoke the language like a native. And while he was new to La Paz, which was some forty miles below the border, the scene was familiar.

Adobe houses and mud huts were scattered at random in the darkness. The wail of sleepy children, dying cooking fires glowing fantastically in front of the mud huts. Swarms of half-starved dogs prowling the night in search of food, and the distant sound of guitars, hauntingly sad and primitive—Mexico at night.

Halfway down the dark main street, Clay halted in front of a *cantina* from which erupted a violent uproar of hilarity. Eying the place a moment, he dismounted and tied his horse among a dozen others at the hitching rack, certain that he had found the absolute end of the trail.

Gringos were none too welcome this far below the border, so Clay entered the *cantina* with his eyes open and his thumb hooked in his gun belt. He need not have troubled himself. The low-ceilinged barroom was filled with tobacco smoke, the howl of drunken voices, and the piercing music of a string orchestra. Nearly a score of men were packed into the place, and all of them were so roaring drunk that Clay's entrance went entirely unnoticed.

Dark-eyed dancing girls whirled from table to table, smirking and laughing at the roisterers who clutched at them vainly. Clay, standing near the door, grinned to himself. Felipe Mendoza knew how to reward his outfit. The First National Bank of Mescal was paying for it, and there was nothing like a good carouse to ease the strain after a raid.

Peering closely through the dim light cast by guttering candles, Clay sought to find Mendoza. He saw the five Americans who belonged to the gang, but nowhere could he spot

the bandit chief. Suddenly, he saw a pair of bartenders, heavily laden with bottles, stagger toward a door at the rear of the roaring *cantina*. The door opened, and Clay caught a glimpse of a bespangled sombrero pushed back from a swart, gleaming face. That was all he wanted to know. He pushed away from the door and, keeping close to the wall, headed for the back of the barroom.

Reaching the door, he hesitated for an instant, then rapped sharply with his knuckles.

"*Quién es?*" Mendoza's voice rumbled thickly.

"Me," Clay replied, opened the door, and stepped into a hornets' nest.

BEFORE him, in a small room littered with bottles, stood Mendoza and a dapper little Mexican, resplendent in military trappings. Clay, somewhat surprised to find an army officer in conference with a notorious bandit, closed the door with a bang that seemed to bring Mendoza out of a spell of sudden paralysis.

"*Nombre de Dios!*" the bandit spat. "What ees eet you do here? 'Ave you come now to steal thee hair from my head?"

Clay started back in surprise, his face darkening. "I changed my mind," he replied bluntly. "I'd like to join up with your outfit."

"Ho, ho!" Mendoza exploded, his glittering eyes seeming suddenly to pull themselves down to inky pin points of black fire. "Like a gentleman I make you one offer to help you, because I know you need money ver' bad. All you 'ave to do ees go into thees bank, an' frighten thees gringo weeth your gun, so two-three of my men can come een quiet an' take the money without the rangairs seeing. But, no! You weel not do thees for Felipe Mendoza, the greatest bandit in——"

"That's what I'm tellin' you," Clay interrupted gruffly. "I've changed my way of thinkin', and that's why I'm here."

"Liar!" Mendoza snarled, caressing the dirty bandage on his left shoulder. "You 'ave come like a spy! Een Mescal you tell thees Draven what I say to you, an' he ees wait for us to come. Two of my men are keeled, an' I 'ave thees gringo bullet to bite my arm. By the hell, I keel you like a dog!"

Clay, backed against the door, had no time to be angry. Three men went for their guns, but only one made the draw. The Texan snaked his six-shooter from its holster while the bandit and the military man were still making the grab.

"Shut your mouth, or I'll gut-shoot you!" Clay snapped as Mendoza parted his thick lips for a yell that would bring the score of bandits hurtling in from the barroom.

"Name of the devil!" the dandified little officer spat hoarsely, the fingers of his gun hand twitching. "This gringo dog is mad!"

Whatever ideas Clay may have had previously, he banished them now. His one thought was to get out of that back room before some one came in from the bar. There was a small window in the back wall, and he made for it on the jump, keeping his gun on the two Mexicans as he traveled.

"Dog!" Mendoza choked in Spanish, his *tequila*-loosened features contorting savagely. "By the bones, I'll roast you over a fire!"

"Shut up!" Clay commanded harshly, and thrust one foot out through the window which was no more than a three-foot hole in the adobe wall.

Another instant, and Clay would

be sprinting through the darkness, headed for his bronc. Then, in a flash, the tables were turned. The door from the barroom flew open, admitting a bartender with another supply of drinks. Mendoza, dodging trickily, flung himself flat on the floor, yelling at the top of his lungs.

Straddling the wide window sill, in an awkward position, Clay hurled a snap shot that missed the bellowing bandit's head by a hair's breadth. And that was all the shooting the gray-eyed young Texan had time to do.

The speed with which Mendoza's gang could go into action, drunk or sober, was little short of amazing. A solid wedge of bandits burst into the back room, and Clay plunged out of the window, bullets snapping around him.

He hit the ground on his side, rolled over like a cat, and sprang to his feet. Heads popped out of the window, but he didn't waste time throwing lead. Forty miles deep in Mexico, faced by a score of bandits, howling, crazy drunk, his only chance was to get to his bronc and out of town as fast as he could ride.

In two flying jumps, he was at the corner of the *cantina,* heading for the hitching rack. A side door of the establishment was yanked open, spraying a shaft of yellow light across his pathway. Dark forms came hurtling out of the door, and Clay whirled back into the dark alleyway in mid-stride. A gun cracked behind him as the bandits leaping out through the back window glimpsed the outline of his flying figure against the light spreading out from the open door.

In an instant the twisting alley was thundering with guns, and Clay, hopelessly cut off from his bronc, did the only thing left for him to do. With lead enveloping him in a crackling hail, he darted out of the alley, into the open space between two buildings. Whether his maneuver had been covered by the darkness, he wisely didn't wait to discover.

Running as fast as his high heels would permit, he dodged in and out between rows of mud huts, heading blindly for the edge of town. Dogs snarled at him, and sleepy peons cursed him as he raced through the darkness, stumbling over cooking pots and water casks. The uproar of his pursuers came on steadily, and his only hope was to find a place where he could hide until he could get back to his bronc.

His lungs pumping like a bellows, Clay burst from behind the last row of huts, out into the mesquite fringing the town. A hundred yards from where he stood, he could vaguely see what appeared to be a clump of trees, or tall brush, and he hit for it on the run.

When he was within a few rods of his objective he saw that it was not a clump of trees, but a vine-covered wall, with trees beyond. However, he didn't stop. The uproar behind him had spread, until the whole of La Paz was in bedlam, and that open mesquite flat was no place to be caught.

Traveling at top speed, Clay took the high wall in one desperate, clawing jump. Landing on his hands and knees on the other side of it, he got instantly to his feet. Ahead of him in the gloom he made out the outlines of a low, rumbling building in which there was no light or sign of life. All around him tall shrubs crawled upward in the darkness, and from somewhere came the tinkling sound of a fountain.

Clay took a cautious step forward, then froze in his tracks. There was a sibilant rustling in the shrubbery

beside him, and the cold muzzle of a rifle was rammed forcibly against the side of his neck.

III.

BEFORE Clay could catch his breath, his six-shooter was whisked from its holster. Half a dozen figures materialized out of the shrub-dotted darkness, and there was an ominous clicking of gun hammers.

"Dead dogs are good dogs!" a voice purred venomously. "Francisco—Carlos! Quickly——"

A hand was clapped over Clay's mouth, and he was hastily bundled across the garden to the house. An instant later, he was shoved through a dark doorway, the door slamming heavily behind him. There was a moment of utter silence and Stygian darkness, then there was a dry creak of hinges, and a figure bearing a lighted candle loomed out of the dark.

Blinking his eyes against the sudden burst of light, Clay saw the sombreroed shadows of five or six men dancing grotesquely on the walls as the candle bearer swiftly crossed the room. Beyond, he caught a fleeting glimpse of rich furnishings and heavily shuttered windows.

"*Un gringo!*" The words cracked through the stifling silence like the sound of a whip.

A thin, hatless old man, his gray hair and sweeping mustache gleaming in the candlelight, stepped forward swiftly. He was small, his shoulders were stooped, his face gaunt, but withal he had the manner of an aristocrat.

"So!" he said bitterly in Spanish. "You come here to spy! Very well, you shall die like a spy!"

Clay blinked almost dazedly. He had been trapped and captured so swiftly that his wits were still scattered.

"*Si!*" He shrugged helplessly. "If it ain't you, it's Mendoza. So I reckon it don't make any difference whether you roast me, or turn me over to your *compadre*, Felipe, to do the job."

The old man's body jerked, his face going black with volcanic anger. "For that insult, you shall have your tongue slit before you die!" he spat out. "Mendoza the scavenger will howl when he finds one of his gringo vultures with his tongue gone!"

In spite of the guns pressing against him, Clay started violently, his mind clearing with a bang.

"You mean that you and Mendoza ain't friends?" he demanded swiftly, speaking half in Spanish and half in English.

"Don Lucio Romero, in league with that son of the devil?" the old man exploded. "Holy Mother! You talk like a madman! Pedro! Quickly with the knife! Out with the jackal's tongue!"

Then Clay saw the light. His capture by the old don's men was the result of mistaken identity. They thought him to be one of the Americans belonging to Mendoza's gang. And it was obvious enough that Don Lucio regarded Mendoza and his followers with deadly hatred. That was Clay's one ray of hope, and he pounced upon it desperately.

"You trail the wrong rabbit, señor!" he shot out, speaking entirely in Spanish. "The noise you hear from the town is Señor Mendoza hunting for me to toast me over a fire." Clay, with his life at stake, wisely and swiftly altered the facts to fit the situation. "Only today have I come down from Mescal," he went on, his eyes on the Mexican who had slid forward, knife

in hand, "to settle a private matter with this bandit, Mendoza. But his men were too much for me, and had it not been for your garden wall, I would now be in their hands."

A shadow of doubt flitted across Don Lucio's taut, sunken face. He hesitated for an instant, then shook his head fiercely.

"A pretty song, señor," he said. "But we dare not risk the quality of its truth. A dead man never causes trouble, my friend!"

Clay started a reply, but before he could speak, he was hurled back against the wall, the man with the knife coming forward swiftly.

"Stop!" a feminine voice called evenly from the shadows at the other end of the room, and there was the faint creak of hinges. "You are wrong, father. This man speaks the truth. I watched his face as he spoke."

The gray-haired old man spun on his heel, his dark eyes blazing. "Raquel!" he snapped. "These things are not for you. Leave at once!"

High heels tapped unhurriedly across the floor, and a girl stepped into the circle of flickering candlelight. Of less than medium size, her hair was blue-black, her eyes wide and brown. Exquisitely beautiful, she seemed utterly out of place in the circle of savage-faced men, yet her manner was poised and certain.

"Murder is not for a Romero, father," she said, and her teeth were glittering pearls in the candlelight. "I was at my window, and I saw this man dash out of town like a rabbit before the wolves. And, too, I heard the voice of Mendoza shout in great rage, 'The gringo, the gringo! Do not let him escape!' "

With a weird oath, Don Lucio caught up the candle and thrust it close to Clay's face. For a long moment, the little old man stared intently at the broad-shouldered Texan.

"By the bones!" he exclaimed shrilly, backing off a step. "It may be that you have seen well, and spoken truly, daughter. There is no evil in this man's face; only the wildness that is the brand of the American!"

Clay, still plastered against the wall, relaxed, and shot a grateful look at Don Lucio's daughter. He was still but a tottering step from death, but when she smiled back at him, his heart seemed to jump.

"*Gracias, señorita!*" he mumbled, bowing as best he could with three six-shooters jammed against his chest.

"Speak further, señor," Don Lucio said crisply. "Have you any proof that you are not in league with Felipe Mendoza?"

"Only my word that I am Señor Barlow of Texas," Clay replied in Spanish. "And that had it not been for your garden wall, Mendoza the bandit would have another scalp to count."

Don Lucio, scowling uncertainly, parted his lips to ask a question, but the words were never uttered. The outside door was flung open, and an excited Mexican burst into the room.

"Don Lucio!" he cried, a wildly exultant look on his face. "Miguel Herrar and Sebastian Montoya have just come from the Rio Grande with the last load of guns! Already they are here in the garden with them and——"

"Silence, fool!" Don Lucio rasped, throwing a panicky look at Clay. "There are other ears than ours present."

The newcomer's face went white, and he futilely clapped both hands over his mouth. Clay looked from Don Lucio to Raquel, and then back

at the old man. Guns? From the Rio Grande? What the hell was this? From what he had heard around Mescal, Mendoza's gang had been doing all the gun-running.

FOR A MOMENT, Clay stared at the old man in bewilderment; then in a flash he saw at least part of the truth. From rumors, he knew there was some sort of a revolution brewing, and instantly he realized that Don Lucio was in some way connected with the impending upheaval. Aristocratic old *haciendos* didn't smuggle guns across the Rio Grande for the fun of it. Clay could see that plainly enough, and, as plainly, he saw a way to extricate himself from the mess in which he had become entangled.

"Señor Don Lucio," he said, and boldly thrust aside the men guarding him, "my ears have heard nothing. Your business is your own. My only concern is to slit Felipe Mendoza's black throat!"

For a tense moment no one in the room moved or breathed. Raquel Romero stood rigid, her red lips compressed tightly. Fear and doubt chased themselves across Don Lucio's face, then the old man straightened his stooped shoulders.

"Señor," he said gravely, "I believe you. You are an honest man."

Don Lucio turned toward the door, and Clay suppressed a grunt of relief.

"Quickly!" the old man snapped to his followers. "We must help Miguel and Sebastian unload."

That was all. The men filed out of the room, and Clay found himself alone with the raven-tressed daughter of the old *haciendo*.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence, then Clay belatedly pulled his hat from his head.

"Miss, I sure want to thank you," he began clumsily, only to check himself, and switch to Spanish. "*Le doy á V. muchas gracias——*"

Raquel Romero laughed softly, her perfect teeth flashing in the candlelight. "Eet' ees all right to speak English," she said. "Mebbe I do not speak eet so well, but Don Lucio and I 'ave been een El Paso many times, so I know what you say."

"All right!" Clay grinned. "But no matter how I say it, I sure want to thank you for sayin' what you said to Don Lucio."

For an instant, a quick, hot fire burned in the girl's dusky eyes. "But why should I not have said eet?" she replied. "I saw your face, and I knew you were telling the truth."

Clay flushed guiltily. He hadn't told the truth. If Mendoza had accepted him, he would have at that moment been aligned against this dark-eyed girl who had saved his life.

"Well," he said lamely, dropping his eyes. "I reckon I done the best I could, considerin'."

The outside door swung open, admitting Don Lucio. The old man's step was firm and confident, and there blazed in his eyes a new, flashing defiance.

"The men are storing these guns with the others, and to-morrow night we shall distribute them!" he said to his daughter; then turned to Clay. "Señor Barlow," he said, "you have seen enough, so there is no use trying to evade the truth. Yes; there is to be a revolution. A small one, and a just one, señor. The governor of Chihuahua is old, and his *commandantes* rule as they please. Here in La Paz we are oppressed not only by El Capitan Rafael Gonzales, the *commandante*, but by this devil of a Mendoza, who is in league with him."

Clay thought of the military man he had seen in the *cantina* with Mendoza, and asked quickly: "What's this *commandante* look like? Is he a little feller, with a twisted mustache?"

"That is he, the cruel little peacock!" Don Lucio replied bitterly. "He is little more than a tool for Mendoza, who gives him a share of his loot for protection from the troops."

"So that's the way they work it!" Clay grunted.

Now, he understood why the Mexican cavalry had let him cross the Rio Grande unmolested. They had evidently taken him for a member of Mendoza's gang, somehow left behind after the raid on the bank.

"That is the way they work it!" the old *haciendo* replied with deepening bitterness. "But that is not all. They rob, and murder like Apaches when the people have no more money for them. Already this season they have forced me to pay thrice my regular taxes. I have tried to send messengers to his excellency, the governor, but every time they have been slain from ambush.

"These two sons of Satan dare not let the old man know they are strangling us. And, I swear to you, señor, they are strangling us! So, if our revolution fails," Don Lucio threw his thin hands high above his head, "we will all be dead, and no worse off than we are now. But, by the eternal fires, señor, we shall not lose! We dare not lose!"

The old don shot a look at Raquel, something akin to terror leaping into his sunken eyes. The girl's lips twitched, and her dusky cheeks went white.

"No!" she cried, her voice throaty with sudden fear. "We must not lose!"

AN IDEA had been forming rapidly in Clay's mind, and as he looked at Raquel's strained, white face, it crystallized into a blazing determination. Whether it was because he was falling in love for the first time in his life, or because his riotous blood was clamoring for action, he did not know. For that matter, he didn't even stop to think.

"Señor," he said, and slapped his empty holster, "if you'll have your boys give me back my gun, I'd like to join up with you. I got considerable to settle with Mendoza, myself."

And so, Claibourne Isaiah Barlow, born to the free soil of Texas, became a revolutionist in Mexico. Don Lucio bounded forward, seizing his hand with a cry of delight.

"Señor, you do us an honor!" the old man blurted out. "You already have a feud with this bandit devil, otherwise, I should not let you endanger yourself. But, as it is, it is an honor to accept your offer!"

"Now, I know we shall not lose!" Raquel cried. She did not touch Clay, but there was something in her eyes that made his chest suddenly seem too tight. "Father," she exclaimed, "we must have wine with which to salute Señor Barlow!"

She turned, darting across the room, and, as he watched her go, Don Lucio's face became grave again.

"It is for her that I worry," he almost groaned. "I meant to send her to your country before the trouble starts, but she will not leave me. Her mother is dead, and I am all she has. And for a year I have had to keep her in hiding, first at one friend's place, and then another, señor. This devil—this wolf, Mendoza, would have her for his own!"

Clay's mouth went hard as the outer door opened, and two of the

men who had been hiding the guns entered the room.

"The others are finishing the job, señor," said one of them. "And the noise in the town has quieted."

"It is well," Don Lucio replied, "for Señor Barlow now fights with us!"

There was a moment of skeptical silence from the pair, Ramon and Fernando, who were obviously fighting men, not servants. Then they greeted Clay warmly, their teeth flashing in friendly smiles.

Raquel, followed by an old Indian servant carrying a basket of wine and a tray of glasses, returned to the room. The glasses were quickly filled, and Don Lucio raised his to the others.

"Liberty!" the old aristocrat cried, his eyes blazing fiercely. "To-morrow night we distribute the guns to our friends who wait for them! The next day at dawn, we strike! Drink! To liberty, and Señor Barlow, who shall help us win it!"

The sound of running feet came abruptly from the garden, and the outer door flew open with a crash. One of Don Lucio's men burst through the doorway, his brown face a dirty gray.

"Don Lucio!" he cried wildly, but got no further.

A carbine cracked viciously from the garden, and the man went down in a twisting somersault that carried him halfway across the room.

Clay jumped back, swearing futilely as his hand shot down to his empty holster. There was another rush of feet, and a horde of poorly clad *provincials* poured through the doorway. Clay and the two fighting men, Ramon and Fernando, were swept from their feet, clubbed into semiconsciousness, and slammed against the wall, bayonets at their throats. Don Lucio went down under one savage blow, and Raquel was dragged away from the old man by a pair of greasy soldiers.

Another wave of men poured through the doorway, and Clay, scarcely able to stand, saw the rest of Don Lucio's men being herded into the room by another contingent of *provincials*. Behind the soldiers strode El Capitan Rafael Gonzales, and Mendoza, the bandit.

"Ho, ho!" the dandified little *commandante* bawled in a nasal whine when he saw Clay pinned against the wall. "We trail these rebel gun-runners, and we find your gringo, Felipe! Did I not tell you he was more than likely in league with these scoundrels?"

Mendoza stared at Clay in amazement, then, with a foul oath, started toward him, both his six-shooters raised. Halfway across the floor, the bandit chieftain checked himself, a crafty leer twisting his heavy lips. Turning back, he spoke swiftly to the *commandante*, who listened eagerly.

"To be sure, Felipe!" Gonzales nodded. "That is the best way. For the republic! Who, then, can complain? A rebel is a rebel!"

At a barked order, two of the ragged soldiers dragged Don Lucio to his feet, and *el capitan*, strutting like a pompous little peacock, crossed to the center of the room.

"Revolutionists, eh?" he bawled, glaring around at the prisoners. "Don Lucio, I have found a hundred contraband guns buried in your garden. I do not have to tell you what that means. You are a traitor, and, by the Holy Mother, you shall die like a traitor!"

There was an instant of breathless silence, then one of the trapped revolutionists choked out a broken prayer.

"Silence!" the officer roared. "A

pack of traitorous dogs, you are. Dogs who would bring woe to the republic! Very well, you shall die like dogs. To-morrow, at the crack of dawn! And the gringo goes with you!"

Clay stiffened, but the bayonets pressing against him held him back. Mendoza reached out and dragged Raquel away from the two *provincials* who held her, a saccharine smile wiping the blood lust from his greasy face.

"Ah," he sighed in mock sadness, "who shall care for you when your rebel father is dead? I shall, my pretty one! I, Felipe Mendoza, who have hunted you for a year."

He drew her close to him, and Raquel's hand flashed upward like a rapier, her nails raking the side of his face from ear to chin.

"Hellcat!" Mendoza howled, and caught her savagely up in his arms despite the blows she rained on his bleeding face. "I'll break you of those habits, if I have to cut you to ribbons!"

Clay surged wildly against the bayonets pinning him to the wall. "Drop her, you stinkin' greaser!" he yelled hoarsely.

There was the sickening spat of a steel-shod gun butt crashing against flesh, and Clay crumpled to the floor, blood gushing from a jagged gash high on his cheek bone.

IV.

THE ODOR of dank, half-rotten straw, and the scuttling noise of roaches were the first things to occupy Clay's senses when he shook off the effects of the blow. Pulling himself up to a sitting position, he beheld a vertical panorama of heavy iron bars silhouetted against a dim shaft of flickering light. The air stank of filth and decay, and he didn't have to wonder where he was. Nothing but the inside of a provincial *calaboza* could smell like that.

"Thank Heaven!" Don Lucio's voice quavered through the murky darkness. "I thought those devils had already killed you."

Clay turned, bumping into the old man huddled beside him in the malodorous straw. Beyond were the dim figures of Don Lucio's men. Thin, dry whisperings, like the ghostly sound of the night wind through the mesquite, rose up from the huddled forms.

"They pray for my daughter, and for their souls," Don Lucio sobbed. "These brave men, who must die with me. And you, señor! I have brought you to your doom. When the ghost of dawn sighs in the east, you shall stand with your back to a wall soaked with the blood of a hundred martyrs!"

Claibourne Isaiah Barlow's name had a poetic ring to it, but there was little of poetic fancy in his make-up. Accordingly, in his ears rang not the sighing of the ghost of dawn, but the thundering crash of a firing squad's rifles.

Clay lurched hastily to his feet, and Don Lucio caught at him with his hands.

"Quietly, in Heaven's name!" the old man implored. "The guards are many, and they have been given orders to kill us in our cell if we so much as stir!"

Clay thrust Don Lucio gently aside, his mouth grim. What difference whether they were slaughtered in their cell, or with their backs to a wall? A guard, with a carbine slung over his shoulder, shuffled past the cell, and Clay, waiting until he was out of sight, stepped to the cell door.

All he could see was the short corridor, and the guardroom at the up-

per end of it, where half a dozen additional guards were noisily playing cards. There were no other cells. La Paz's *calabozo* was more a fortress than a prison.

The guard swung back up the corridor, and Clay faded deep into the darkness of the cell, his blood-smeared face taut. There was no possible chance of escape. The cell was a low room with thick adobe walls and a narrow, barred door weighing half a ton.

Don Lucio, crouched in the filthy straw, was praying in a rasping whisper.

"My daughter—my daughter," he repeated over and over.. "Spare her, O God, spare her!"

"Where is she?" Clay demanded, dropping at the old man's side.

"Mendoza has taken her with him." Don Lucio groaned. "She fought like a tigress, but he dragged her away, taunting me with a fiend's threats of what he would do to her when——"

The old man broke off with a choked sob, and Clay cursed silently and savagely at his helplessness. Then he cursed the seven Mexicans who sat against the opposite wall of the cell like so many dead men. Their ashen faces buried on their knees, Don Lucio's men sat mumbling their prayers in a state of fatalistic paralysis. They knew Felipe Mendoza and they knew El Capitan Rafael Gonzales. Death at dawn! The cry, and its inescapable consequences, were the bitter heritage of centuries of ruthless cruelty. There was no hope.

Clay thought again of Raquel Romero, crushed in Mendoza's bearlike arms, and stood up savagely. There had to be hope. Choked with desperation, he turned toward the rear of the cell, and stopped in his tracks.

From somewhere high up in the back wall, he caught the gleam of starlight. Moving swiftly, he crossed to the rear of the cell, and thrust his hand upward. At about arm's length, he struck a deep ledge. Catching hold of it with both hands, he drew himself up cautiously. His eyes reached the level of the ledge, and with a start, he found himself looking out into the starlit night through an opening in the three-foot adobe wall.

CLAY'S hopes went soaring higher than the glittering stars. He heaved forward into the opening, and cracked his head solidly against a stout iron bar. He backed off with a startled grunt, freezing into silence as the guard patrolling the corridor passed the cell door.

The guard moved on, and Clay, hanging by his elbows, swore luridly in his throat. Instead of discovering a forgotten hole in the *calaboza* wall, he had merely found the window of the cell, a small, barred affair, scarcely two feet square.

Resting on one elbow, he pawed out at the bars with his free hand. There were three of them, large as broomsticks, set deeply in the adobe. Clay choked back a futile oath. The stupefied Mexicans mumbling their prayers below him were right. There was no hope. He grasped the middle bar with his left hand and, holding his body away from the wall with his right, lowered himself toward the floor.

Halfway down, his right hand slipped, throwing his weight heavily on his left. There was a faint grating sound in the adobe, above and below the window sill, and the bar Clay was clinging to seemed to give.

With one heave, he was back, his elbows resting on the window sill. Eyes narrowed, he peered closely at the middle bar, and his pulse began

to hammer. The bar had bent inward a full inch.

For an instant, Clay forgot to breathe, torn between surprise and amazement. Then he had it. The bars were not steel, but iron—poorly wrought, poorly tempered, native iron.

Clay came down from the window sill like a cat. Nor did he stop to figure out the next move. There was only one move possible. In half a dozen strides he was crouching at Don Lucio's side.

"Get me the two strongest men in your bunch!" he whispered. "I've found a way to get out of this rat trap!"

At first the old man seemed incapable of moving, then he lurched tremblingly to his feet.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he gasped. "But how?"

"Through the window," Clay muttered. "We ain't got a Chinaman's chance of gettin' away with it, but it's better than waitin' to be knocked in the head like sheep."

Old Don Lucio wasted no more time on questions. Suddenly alive with desperate hope, he darted across the cell to where his followers sat waiting for the gray fingers of dawn to beckon them to eternity.

"Fernando—Ramon!" he whispered hoarsely. "Señor Barlow has found a way to escape. Help him!"

There was an instant of incredulous silence, then two lithe figures rose up in the darkness. Clay caught the pair by the shoulders, whispered to them in Spanish, and shoved them toward the rear wall of the cell.

"Sing, or pray, or do somethin', to cover up the noise!" he said, grasping Don Lucio's withered hand and moved swiftly toward the back of the cell.

Ramon and Fernando grabbed him, and hoisted him up to the window. Clay planted a foot on the shoulder of each Mexican, grasping the middle bar in the window with both hands. Don Lucio, followed by the other doomed men, lifted his voice in a sobbing chant, and Clay went to work.

Three muscle-cracking heaves bent the soft iron bar a good four inches and tore it loose from its sockets. Half a dozen more had it bowed like a horseshoe. Clay set himself and threw all the strength in his sinewy shoulders behind the next heave. There was a dry, popping crunch of crumbling adobe, and the bar came out of the window.

Clay, half turning with the force of the jerk, nearly toppled from his unsteady perch as the bulky figure of the guard suddenly loomed at the cell door.

"Name of the devil!" the guard growled suspiciously, peering into the darkness of the cell. "What do you do in there?"

"We pray, señor," Don Lucio, sensing the approach of catastrophe, called quickly, with a canny display of meekness. "We have but a little while, señor. Do not stop us, I beg of you!"

Clay, flattened against the window sill, dared not breathe as the guard continued to glower into the cell.

"A fine noise you make of it," the soldier snorted, obviously flattered by Don Lucio's humble manner. "Very well, go ahead then, but do not beat your heels so, it bothers my head."

"What is the trouble there, Pancho?" a voice bawled from the guardroom

"Nothing, lieutenant," the guard called back, moving away from the cell door. "These goats are trying to drive their prayers into the floor,

though I do not see why they should kick their heels when they pray."

Clay gasped with relief. Had the guard been one degree less stupid, there would have been nine bullet-riddled bodies in the cell, instead of nine men who were gambling desperately for their lives.

"Hurry, señor!" Ramon, one of the Mexicans supporting Clay, whispered sibilantly. "Your boots break our shoulders! We cannot hold you much longer."

But Clay dared not hurry. The next time, the guard might think to investigate. Working cautiously, Clay gradually bent the second bar inward with a series of short, quick jerks, stopping every time the guard passed the cell door. The two men under him were groaning softly through clenched teeth, but still Clay did not hurry.

FIVE minutes crawled by, and finally Clay was able to ease the twisted bar from its place. Placing it beside the other on the deep window sill, he fell to work on the third. Ramon and Fernando, unable to withstand the killing torture of Clay's weight on their shoulders, were slowly sinking toward the floor. His hands bleeding, drenched with perspiration, Clay began to work almost recklessly in spite of himself.

In two minutes, he had the last bar bent almost double. It took him another minute to twist it to the proper angle, then, with a final, cautious yank, he pulled it from its sockets. The way to freedom was open.

Placing the bar on the window ledge with the two others, Clay dropped lightly to the floor. Ramon and Fernando slumped down, biting their lips to hold back groans of relief.

"All right!" Clay whispered, one hand on Don Lucio's thin arm. "We got to go one at a time. You go first, but before you go, where does Mendoza live?"

"In the house beside that of the *commandante!*" the old man replied in an emotion-palsied voice. "They live side by side, like brothers, those two! But, señor, I cannot go first. You have won your liberty, so you must be first to taste it. But go carefully! The soldiers' barracks are all around us, and the *commandante's* dwelling is but a stone's throw away!"

The guard shuffled past the cell door, muttering an oath at the lament Don Lucio's men were still sobbing. Clay got to his feet swiftly. There was no time to be lost arguing about who was to get out first. The object was for all of them to get out, and as quickly as possible.

"All right," Clay consented. "I'll go first if them barracks is as close as you say. Cain't tell, mebbe they've heard us workin', and are jest layin' for us to make the break. If I make it, the rest of you come as fast as you can, and do it quiet!"

The guard passed again, and Clay darted to the rear of the cell. Grasping the window ledge, he pulled himself up onto it and wriggled out through the narrow opening until his head was in the open. He remained motionless an instant, scanning the darkness, then he dragged the twisted iron bars forward and dropped them out of the window as quietly as possible. They struck the ground with a dull thud, rolling away from the wall of the *calaboza*.

Clay braced himself, half expecting to see a horde of *provincials* rush in through the darkness. None came. That was all he wanted to know. With one heave, he squeezed his broad shoulders out through the

narrow window, and slid head-first to the ground.

Landing on his hands, Clay rolled over on his back, then sprang to his feet. There was a faint scuffling above him, and Don Lucio's head and shoulders popped out of the window. The old man squirmed forward, and all but jumped down into Clay's arms. Wriggling and squirming, the others came, until only Fernando and Pedro remained inside the *calaboza*. Then, without warning, disaster swooped down on the desperate little band.

There was a swishing rumble, and a section of the adobe wall around the *calaboza's* window gave away. Weakened by the rough tactics Clay had used to wrench the bars loose, and further disturbed by the weight of the escaping prisoners, the adobe came crashing to the ground with a dull roar.

"*Nombre de Dios!*" Clay heard a voice bawl from within the jail. "A light! Fetch a light!"

Fernando and Pedro came diving head-first through the gaping hole in the wall, and Clay, making a wild grab, caught up one of the twisted iron bars.

"Come on!" he ordered hoarsely. "Follow me!"

Wild panic had seized the little knot of Mexicans, and they followed him like sheep as he dashed around the corner of the *calaboza*. The door of the jail was flung open almost in Clay's face, the lieutenant of the guards bounding out into the open, bent on sounding an alarm. But the officer failed in his mission. Clay swung the iron bar with all his might, knocking the Mexican flat on his face.

With one sweep, he grabbed the fallen officer's six-shooter and tossed the iron bar to Ramon. Clay shot a look through the open door of the *calaboza*, and with the quickness of light, seized upon their one chance for success.

He was inside the door in one jump, slamming his six-shooter into the paunch of a wild-eyed guard who came lumbering out of the corridor. Ramon and Fernando, divining Clay's intention, dived through the doorway a split second behind him. Fernando grabbed the guard's carbine, and Ramon knocked the fellow senseless with the iron bar.

The rest was a matter of luck and lightninglike action. Clay and Fernando darted into the corridor while Ramon smashed open the *calaboza's* gun locker.

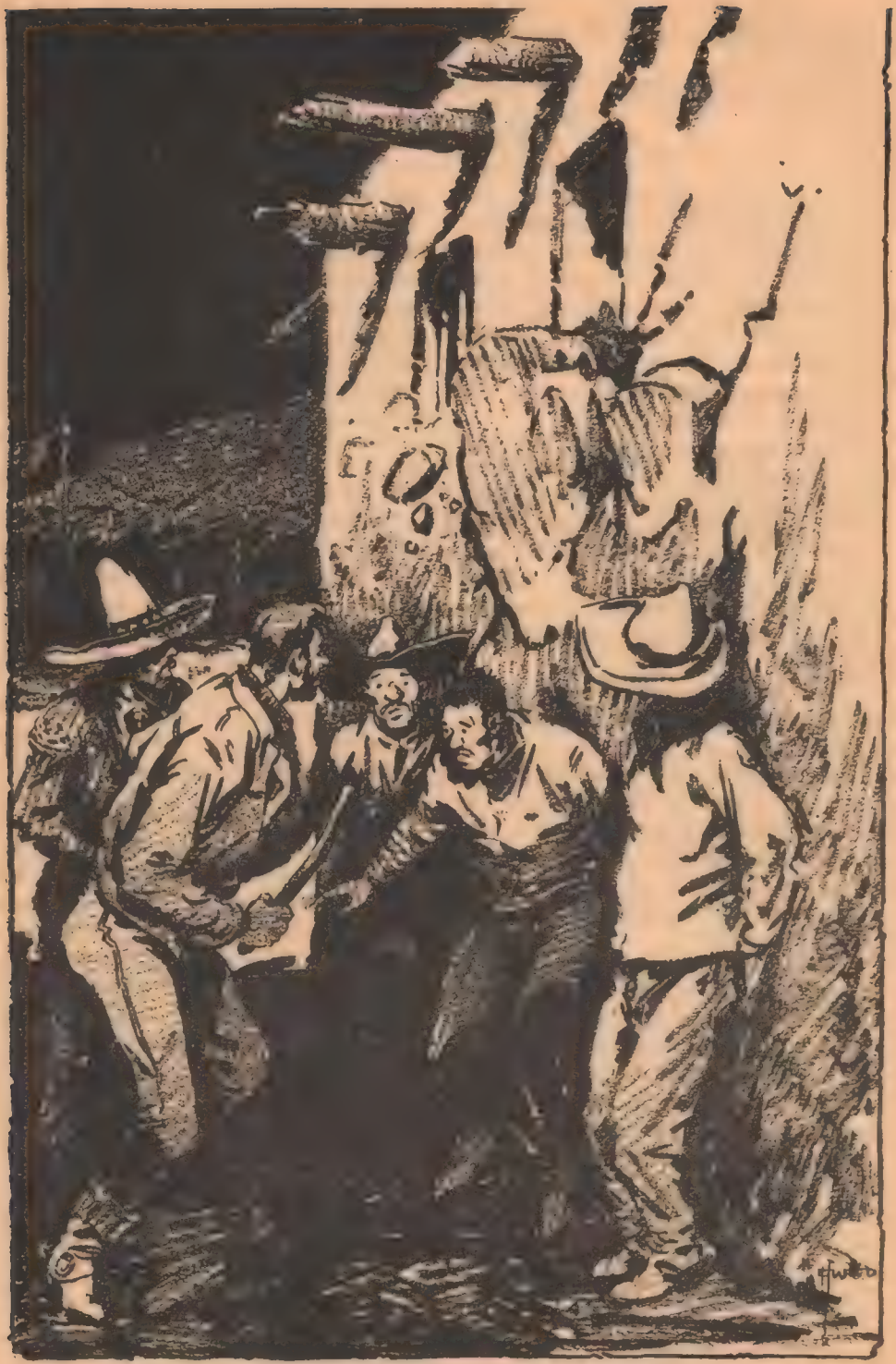
"Silence, you sons of buzzard-sired coyotes!" Fernando spat as he and clay burst in upon the half a dozen guards milling stupidly around the corridor in front of the empty cell. "One little sound will send you to hell!"

The guards, caught flat-footed, gave up without a struggle. They were too flabbergasted even to yell. Their hands went up, and their rifles clattered to the floor.

Clay and Fernando scooped up the guns and backed toward the doorway, where they found Ramon handing out guns and cartridge-laden bandoleers to the rest of the party as fast as he could haul them out of the locker. Even Don Lucio, old and bent, was throwing a bandoleer over his shoulder, a rifle clutched in his hand. Seeing that the guns he had taken from the guards were unnecessary, Clay dropped them and snatched up a belt of six-shooter ammunition.

"To the corrals!" he snapped in Spanish, thrusting Don Lucio out of the door before him. "As fast as you can travel!"

"*Si, compadre!*" Ramon replied as he dashed from the jail. "Follow



He swung the iron bar with all his might.

me. They are behind the *commandante's* house!"

REALIZING that they were out of danger, the guards in the sacked *calaboza* began to yell wildly for help, as Ramon led the dash for the corrals. Alarm shots rang out from all quarters, and in a moment a hundred sleepy-eyed *provincials* were pouring from the mud huts dotting the darkness around the *calaboza*.

"*Quieto, hombres! Quieto!*" Clay muttered as Ramon darted up to the first of three corrals that loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

The men were quiet, but savagely effective. The two drowsy sentries watching over the *commandante's* cavalry horses had their skulls cracked before they knew what had struck them.

Lights sprang up suddenly in two houses not fifty yards from the corrals. Doors began to slam, and Mendoza's voice rang hoarsely through the night.

"Gonzales!" the bandit bawled. "Quickly! There is trouble at the jail."

Working swiftly and silently, Clay and the others tossed saddles onto anything with four legs in the big main corral. Mounted on one horse and leading another, Clay spurred out of the corral gate as Mendoza's voice rang out again, this time from the direction of the *calaboza*. Simultaneously, Gonzales' furious nasal whine came driving through rising uproar as the *commandante* howled questions at the jail guards.

"Where is Mendoza's house?" Clay demanded, making certain that Don Lucio had mounted a horse.

"That one!" Don Lucio cried, pointing to the first of the two houses in which the lights had sprung up.

Clay, with the old man at his side, and the others trailing swiftly behind, made for the bandit's abode on the dead lope. A moment later, he sprang down from his saddle, leaving his mount, and the spare horse he had brought, in Don Lucio's care. Ramon leaped to the ground, following close on Clay's heels as he burst into Mendoza's dwelling through a side door.

There were close to a dozen rooms in the pretentious dwelling the bandit chieftain had taken for himself; so, with death roaring behind him, Clay had to work swiftly. Without time for niceties, he simply kicked in the doors as he came to them. The fifth one was locked.

"Stay away, Señor Mendoza!" a furious feminine voice warned shrilly. "There is still one chair left in this room! I shall break that over your wolf's head, too!"

Clay kicked the door down and dodged the chair Raquel Romero hurled at him. Her clothing was torn, her hair in wild disarray, but there was nothing but the fire of battle in her brown eyes. Nor did she swoon prettily when Clay caught her up in his arms.

"*Gracias, señor!*" she cried, hugging him tightly. "I am ver' glad I am so poor that time weeth the chair!"

"*Adelante, compadre!*" Ramon bawled from a window. "They have seen us, and they come like madmen!"

Clay dashed across the room, and out of the door as fast as his long legs would carry him. Don Lucio cried out exultantly when he saw Raquel being tossed onto the extra horse Clay had brought, but there was no time for any sort of reunion. A hundred *provincials* and a dozen bandits were boiling through the darkness from the direction of the *calaboza*.

"Name of the devil!" Mendoza howled wildly. "They are stealing her! There! From my very house!"

"Fire!" *El Capitan* shrieked at his bewildered troops. "Use your guns! May the devil take your souls, fire!"

Clay kicked Raquel's mount into motion, then rammed the spurs into his own. A hundred guns crashed through the night in a roaring volley, but the rebels were gone, plunging away in the darkness.

V.

RIDING like the wind, the little party swept away from La Paz, out onto the mesquite flat. Two more crashing volleys rang out behind them, but the confused *provincials* were firing blindly at a speeding target they could not see.

A mile out of town, Clay pulled to a halt and cocked his ear to the night wind. Strident yells, punctuated now and then by a solitary shot, came ringing through the darkness from the direction of La Paz.

"There are a score of good horses back in those corrals, señor," Ramon warned, spurring anxiously to Clay's side. "And those sons of hell will hunt us down like wolves! We have no time to waste!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Clay saw Don Lucio and Raquel fervently embrace one another, and he swore nervously under his breath. For thirty miles, in every direction, the mesquite-dotted plain was as flat as a table. There was no place to hide and no way of covering their trail.

Aimless, panicky flight would be worse than futile. And Clay, as hard-headedly practical as he was hot-headed, didn't try to fool himself. He knew he had had the wildest sort of good luck, and he was too shrewd to rely on its continuing forever.

Northward lay the Rio Grande and safety for Don Lucio, Raquel, and their fellow rebels. Also, there was a hard-jawed ranger captain who would stop to ask no questions the next time he laid eyes on Clay Barlow. But Clay was not thinking of himself. He cast a quick look at Raquel Romero's torn clothing, and his mind was made up.

"We got to hit for the Rio Grande," he said tersely. "There ain't no place for us to hide here, and even if there was, they'd wipe us out."

A sudden puff of wind swept across the starlit plain, bringing with it the mounting thunder of drumming hoofs. Don Lucio straightened in his saddle with a choked cry.

"*Si! Si!* The Rio Grande!" the old man exclaimed urgently. "And quickly, señor! Those wolves come like the wind!"

Clay whirled his bronc, pointing its head toward the North Star.

"All right," he grunted. "Let's go."

Raquel reached out and caught his hand as he passed her. "Señor," she whispered, "for what you have done to-night, the saints will bless you, and perhaps, some time, I shall be able to thank you enough."

She clung to his hand a moment, then dropped back beside her father.

TWO HOURS later, dawn broke out of the east, flooding the vast, silent plain with ghostly, gray light. Clay turned in his saddle and saw what he had expected to see. A mile behind on the back track, a pillar of dust rose like a shadowy specter.

"Mendoza!" Fernando said and swore bitterly. "The dog knows we must ride for the Rio Grande, and

he knows we must take the shortest route!"

No one else spoke. There was nothing to be said. If they could see Mendoza's dust cloud, he could see theirs. There was no chance for tricks or stratagems. Either they outran Mendoza, or he outran them. That was all there was to it, and the Rio Grande was still twenty miles away.

The light grew stronger, and Clay, looking back over his shoulder, could see the black bulk of the pursuing party. At least a score in number, the pursuers came on at a breakneck pace, with Mendoza and *el capitan* riding well in the van. A faint yell rang across the plain, and the Mendoza squadron, sighting the fleeing rebels, picked up speed with astonishing ease.

Slowly and inexorably, the gap between the two dust clouds began to close. Three of the horses Clay had grabbed hastily from the corral of the *commandante* were of poor stuff, and the grueling pace had begun to tell on them. Heads hanging, withers jerking unevenly, they were lagging behind the others. Clay cursed the animals savagely and futilely. Foot by foot Mendoza closed in.

A scant half mile separated the two dust clouds when the sun rolled up over the rim of the desert. Don Lucio was praying softly. Raquel's face was white and set. The others were silent, their eyes desperately on the hazy line of hills which fringed the Rio Grande far ahead.

Nothing new, this breathless drama of two pillars of dust flashing swiftly up out of the vast Chihuahua plain. It had been variously played for half a century, with bandits, cattle thieves, revolutionists, and banished governors as the actors. Sometimes the play ended happily; sometimes the villain triumphed. Fate was the director, Death, the villain.

The sun was an hour above the horizon when Clay led his staggering little band into the hills bordering the Rio Grande. Less than a quarter of a mile behind them, Mendoza's gang began to use their guns. The range was a shade too far, but bullets were smacking savagely into the dust at the heels of the fleeing rebels' weaving mounts.

His spurs hammering, Clay shot up over a low rise and caught a glimpse of the rolling hills of Texas, half a mile distant, across the Rio Grande. A wild yelp of elation burst from his dust-caked lips. He knew they could make it. The play was over. Then, with the curtain ringing down on a happy ending, the villain turned the tables.

A chance shot from behind knocked Dos Lucio's horse end over end, hurling the old man headlong to the ground. Raquel screamed as her own horse, too tired to jump, stumbled over the dead one and did a half roll that threw her clear of the saddle.

Clay whirled and sprang to the ground, as the rest of the party came to a plunging, confused halt. Howling like Indians, their guns banging furiously, Mendoza and his gang closed in for the kill. With one sweep, Clay grabbed Don Lucio and tossed the limp old man up on the saddle behind one of the Mexicans. The Mexican caught his old leader and, without waiting to be told, hit for the Rio Grande, his spurs flying.

Ramon leaped from his saddle and caught Raquel's horse as the girl struggled to her feet, unhurt, but badly shaken. Clay seized her and tossed her bodily back onto her horse, then hit his own on the fly.

"Ride!" he bawled frantically,

keeping a hand on Raquel for safety's sake.

Lead cracking around them, they rode. And they rode with Mendoza, a scant hundred yards behind them, gaining ground at every jump.

Even before they struck the bank of the Rio Grande, Clay knew what he had to do, and when they reached it, he did it instantly. They were a mile above the crossing at Mescal, and the river was deep, making for slow progress. For all of them to go plunging into it would be suicidal. Mendoza would slaughter them like rabbits as they tried to slog through the swirling river.

"Go with her!" Clay yelled to one of the Mexicans and relinquished his hold on Raquel's arm. "Fernando—Ramon—Pedro—stick with me!"

A warrior to the core, Raquel tried to protest, but there wasn't time. In a flash she and the man Clay had designated to go with her went plunging down the steep river bank. Clay and the three others followed, but the instant they were below the lip of the bank, they sprang from their horses.

Whirling, they threw themselves against the side of the steep cut, dug in their toes, and pumped lead into the oncoming mass of riders as fast as they could trigger. The range was point-blank, so they couldn't miss. Bandits and *provincials* flopped out of their saddles like tenpins, but there were too many bandits and *provincials*, and the time was too short.

In a twinkling the river bank was a mass of plunging riders and blazing guns. Pedro went down, the top of his head torn off by a soft-nosed bullet. El Capitan Rafael Gonzales smashed through the press above Clay, swinging a savage blow downward with his saber. Clay, rolling away from the cut, fired upward, the bullet entering the officer's open mouth, tearing away a corner of his dainty mustache.

Ramon, his six-shooter empty, hurled it at a bandit's head, and went bounding down the river bank. Fernando followed him, blood spurting from a hole in his shoulder. A bullet raked the length of Clay's back, and as he spun under the bite of it, another tore the six-shooter from his hand. Half turned for a plunge down the river bank, he saw Mendoza directly above him.

"Dog of a dog!" the bandit roared, snapping his gun downward again. "Your soul will roast in the devil's oven this day!"

IN SHEER desperation, Clay grabbed the looping reins of the bandit's bridle and hurled himself sideways. Mendoza's bronc slid forward under the force of Clay's weight, its forefeet slipped over the edge of the river bank, and bandit and horse came tumbling downward.

Mendoza, quitting the saddle in mid-air, landed on top of Clay with a crash that sent them rolling head over heels down the steep bank to bring up solidly against a boulder almost at the water's edge. All but knocked senseless, Clay saw the avalanche of riders streaming down from above and felt the searing cut of a powder burn as Mendoza tried to put a bullet through his heart. The Texan, rolling to his knees, made one last savage bid for his life.

Diving forward, he caught Mendoza by the throat with both hands, and smashed his head back against the boulder. The bandit went limp, slumping forward, blood streaming from his mouth.

Clay sprang to his feet, stumbled as a bullet ripped across his thigh, and kept going until he hit the river.

Half a dozen floundering steps carried him into deep water where he had to swim. Bullets were churning around him like hail, and he heard the splashing of hoofs as mounted men plunged into the river after him. Then, suddenly, the roar of gunfire increased, but the splashing sounds behind him ceased.

Completely blinded by a mixture of blood and muddy water, Clay kept swimming as fast as his weary legs and arms would move. He heard a shout somewhere in front of him, then a pair of hands caught him by the shoulders. A moment later, he was half carried and half dragged up onto dry land.

Some one started to swab off his face, and Clay, blinking his eyes, found himself looking at Raquel Romero.

"Well," a vaguely familiar voice growled from above, "what you got to say for yourself?"

Clay looked up, to find Captain Bill Draven of the Texas Rangers standing over him.

For a moment, Clay remained where he was, then got slowly to his feet. Behind Draven were four rangers and Mat Kinnsey, unconcernedly reloading their guns, their eyes on the handful of bandits and *provincials* glowering down from the Chihuahua bank of the river. Don Lucio was propped up against a near-by boulder, and Ramon and Fernando were being looked over by their friends who had crossed the river ahead of them.

Clay cast a defiant glance at Draven and hitched angrily at his empty gun belt.

"I got plenty to say," he replied belligerently, "and the first thing is, turn Don Lucio and his daughter, here, loose. They ain't done nothin' that you can hold 'em for——"

"Never mind about Don Lucio," Draven cut him off. "I've knowed the don ten-twelve years. Him and me's friends. But what I want to know about is you."

"Ah, you want to know about heem, Señor Draven?" Raquel asked eagerly, her white teeth flashing. "I tell you about heem! He ees—ah—*muy caballero! Muy valiente!* Yes, señor, he ees——" Her somewhat hazy command of English left her entirely in her enthusiasm, so she poured forth a glowing account of Clay's activities in rapid-fire Spanish.

And when she had finished, Don Lucio rose and hobbled painfully into the group. The long night's ride, and the fall he had taken, had shaken him up badly, but not too badly to keep him from telling Draven the story of the revolution, and the part all of them had played in it.

"Well, I'll be damned four ways to Christmas mornin'!" the ranger captain blurted and when Don Lucio had completed his story. "If that ain't—well, I'll jest be plumb damned! That little skunk of a Gonzales had us runnin' ourselves crazy tryin' to stop them guns from bein' run down into La Paz, and he had us thinkin' that whoever was runnin' the guns was doin' all this raidin' and killin' up here. You fellers was takin' the guns, and his *compadre*, Mendoza, was doin' the raidin'——"

"By making you think this Mendoza was bringing the guns to us, he thought to discredit us as mere bandits when the revolution came," Don Lucio pointed out gravely. "By the bones, I had never given him credit for being so clever!"

"Say!" Draven exclaimed suddenly. "You won't be able to go back home till this blows over, will

you? Want me to fix it up so's you can stay on this side a while?"

"You've done enough, my friend," Don Lucio replied. "You have saved our lives."

"It wasn't me saved your lives." The ranger laughed. "Me and the boys was doin' early patrol, and when we heard all the shootin', natcherly we looked in on it. Course we shot a couple of bandits back across the river, but that's only in our line of duty." Draven laughed again and winked at the other rangers. "How about it, Don, want to stay up here till things cool off down home?"

"No. That is not necessary, thanks to Señor Barlow!" Don Lucio replied, his face lighting up. "He has done what he had planned to do. This Mendoza, and this Gonzales are gone, so now I may go to his excellency and tell him what we have suffered. There will be no more trouble. As soon as we are rested, we shall start for La Paz."

Draven turned and grinned at Clay, who stood scowling at Mat Kinnsey.

"What's the matter? You lookin' for more trouble?" the ranger captain asked.

Clay looked from Draven to Kinnsey in almost shocked surprise as Kinnsey walked up and thrust out a red paw.

"Shake, Barlow!" Kinnsey rumbled contritely. " 'Pears like I had the wrong tag on you."

"Go ahead, shake with him!" Draven laughed as Clay backed off dubiously. "Everybody can be wrong once in a while."

Raquel, who had been watching and listening with growing comprehension, spoke up quickly.

"What you do now, Señor Barlow?" she asked so directly that Clay started, his face flushing. "Mebbee you 'ave more bandits to trap in La Paz, yes?"

"Daughter, that is no way for you to speak!" Don Lucio said sternly. "If he will so honor us, he shall be our guest for as long as he wishes, and, by the bones, I can think of one of our ranches that needs such a man to manage it. Señor Barlow, would such a thing interest you?"

"Go to it, kid!" Draven chuckled. "Couple of years from now, you might be the richest *haciendo* with the pertiest wife in Chihuahua."

Claibourne Isaiah Barlow sighed and cocked a farewell glance at the Texas landscape. "Cain't tell, I might be, at that," he agreed.

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Ye Olde Tymer

Ready for a Wheelchair? NOT by a Danged Sight!

says Wilfred McCormick

Old Pete had to bite his lips to keep from yelling—there was a small fortune in the safe.

SHERIFF PETE TULLY turned slowly away from the south window of his office in the Sonoro County jail. His small, beadlike eyes shifted upward to squint at a heavy cartridge belt that hung from a nail above his desk. His thin lips clamped together. He nodded slightly, walking across the room to unhook the belt.

He buckled it around his hips. Pulling his floppy black hat down on his graying hair, he started for the door. He paused with one bony hand gripping the latch.

"Jake," he said, turning to address a dejected figure who was squatted along the wall with his head in his hands, "you toss a couple of quilts on the floor in that front cell. Bet-

ter have a lantern goin', too, by the time I get back."

The figure straightened.

He was a tall, slender fellow with nervously drawn, blond features. He wore no hat, and his stockinged feet showed from beneath a faded pair of trousers. On the front of his blue gingham shirt was a nickel-plated star.

He padded across the room to clutch Pete Tully by the sleeve. He peered anxiously into the set, wrinkled face of the old sheriff.

"Don't try it, Pete," he advised, his tones rather high-pitched. "There's three of them buzzards, an' you ain't near as young as you used to be. Don't try it."

Old Pete glared at him. He pulled himself away. "Reckon I'm still sheriff of this county," he snapped scornfully, "in spite of this too-old foolishness that folks keeps talkin' about. Dammit! You act like I was ready for a wheel chair!"

He pointed to a barred door in the wall opposite. "You get that cell in shape. I'll handle the rest of this job."

"You're makin' a mistake—maybe your last one," warned the deputy, shaking his head soberly. "That Boots Gordon is tough. If I hadn't give in to him, just now, he'd have killed——"

"Anyway," interrupted old Pete, with a grim smile barely showing itself from under his long, sandy mustache, "he won't send me back barefoot."

The deputy flinched. His gaze dropped to the floor instinctively. "I ain't the only one he's done that to. It's a pet stunt of his. Remember that Federal officer over in Taiban, an' the sheriff at——"

"I ain't rememberin' nuthin'," old Pete growled, interrupting him again, "except this stuff about me bein' too old. That's a-plenty. You get the cell in shape."

Pete Tully opened the door. He stepped outside, closing it quietly behind him. He stood for a moment, as if undecided, while his searching gaze wandered up and down the double row of buildings that lined the narrow street.

On the other side, about three doors down, was a long, frame affair with lighted lamps already gleaming from its interior. Across the front, in crude letters, was the sign: The Golden Dipper.

The place was, as old Pete well knew, a notorious gambling joint. It was run by a man known as Tony, a swarthy little fellow who had served a term in the Texas State pen, a few years before. Although Pete Tully had suspected the wily proprietor of a number of shady deals in the past, he had never quite succeeded in getting the information that would have sent Tony up for another term.

At last, old Pete grunted. He hitched his trousers a trifle higher and slid his gun butt an inch farther forward. He walked across the street. He stepped up onto the twelve-inch plank that served as a walk and headed directly for The Golden Dipper.

He shoved the door open. If his heart thumped any faster as he strode inside the place, he gave no sign of it in his cold, grim-lipped expression. He went past a small line of loafers who stood with their backs to the bar in front, and stopped facing the array of gambilng tables in the rear.

He recognized, instantly the men he was seeking.

THEY were sitting behind a flat-topped table in the far corner, not playing, but with their hands idly

stretched across the dingy flannel covering. "Boots" Gordon was toying with a deck of cards. One of his men sat on either side of him.

Boots was a big, powerfully built fellow with a vivid knife scar cutting through part of his left eyebrow. He was unusually dark, wearing a week's beard of heavy whiskers, and having a crooked, flat nose that looked as though it had been broken at one time.

On his left, was a lanky, loose-jointed man with long, nervous fingers that kept opening and closing as he glanced from Boots Gordon to the stern old sheriff. The third fellow was a small, round-faced Mexican. He sat perfectly still with his lips pressed tightly together and his eyes on the floor.

Old Pete hesitated for only an instant. Then he walked closer to them, his arms dangling at his sides. About ten feet away, he stopped. He studied them, spraddle-legged.

Boots Gordon flashed a leering smile. "Howdy, old man!" he called. "We been expectin' you." He turned to wink one eye at the tall fellow on his left.

The sheriff glowered at them. Suddenly his hand streaked down. It was up again, almost instantly. His heavy, single action .44 covered the three.

"Put up your paws!" he snarled. "I may be an old man, but this is once when I got a young idea. Put 'em up!"

Boots Gordon shook his head. "Aw, that ain't givin 'a man an even break to——"

"Even break—hell!" roared old Pete. "Put up them paws!"

He came a couple of steps nearer, shoving his gun muzzle forward until it almost touched the ruffian's shirt front.

The men raised their hands. They slouched out from behind the table. There was something in the old-timer's hard stare that didn't invite any hesitancy. He herded them into the center of the floor. Still keeping them covered, he removed their weapons with his free hand. He laid these on the table.

Continuing his search hurriedly, he found a long-bladed knife that was concealed in one of the Mexican's boot tops. He tossed this alongside the guns.

"Come here, Tony!" he called to the proprietor who stood gaping at the proceedings. "You take care of this stuff for me. I'll be back after it."

He jerked his gun barrel toward the door. "Get movin'!" he ordered. "I'm takin' you all to jail."

The whole thing had happened in little more than a minute and had been so easy, in fact, that old Pete himself was surprised. Knowing more than a little about Boots Gordon and his pair of desperado companions, he had expected certain trouble, gun play. The thought suddenly occurred to him that something was decidedly wrong—either Boots wasn't nearly as vicious as rumor had painted him, or he had some other game up his sleeve.

In either case, the old sheriff didn't intend to get caught napping. He'd had entirely too much criticism already about the job needing a younger man and similar remarks.

He realized, too, that if he could succeed in delivering his notorious group to the authorities in the adjoining county, it would be quite a feather in his own cap. Plenty of men had tried to capture Boots, and dismally failed, which was exactly why old Pete wondered at his own easy arrest of the entire band.

They made no effort to resist as he drove them across the street

ahead of him. Boots, grinning smoothly, opened the door and led the way inside the sheriff's office. His two companions followed, old Pete entering last.

THE DEPUTY was nowhere in sight. He had left a lighted lantern on the desk, though, and a couple of quilts were dumped near the doorway.

Old Pete unlocked the cell and hurried his prisoners through the opening. He swung the heavy door back in place and snapped it shut. Watching him from the inside, his hands gripping the iron bars about chin-high, Boots Gordon nodded for him to step closer. Old Pete shook his head.

"If you want to spill any chatter," he said, "you can just as well save it. I ain't any judge." He turned to his desk, making a brief notation in a tablet that he drew from the upper drawer.

"Listen, old man," called Boots, "you can't get by with this. You'd better step over an' let us make you a proposition. It's worth your time.'

"Nope! Ain't in the market." Old Pete started to whistle. He felt better than he had in months. He wondered what folks would think of him now.

Boots Gordon tried again, "You ain't got any money saved up," he said, "an' you're gettin' old. Everybody knows that. Besides, you're all washed up as sheriff of Sonoro County. Everybody knows that, too. You'll be out of a job, soon as election's over. Young Charley Haines is a cinch to beat you. Better use your head, old man! We can cut you in on some easy dough."

"Ain't in the market," the sheriff replied. He glanced up abruptly. "Say," he asked, "is that why you jaspers come into the corral without puttin' up a fight?"

"Sure! Only way we could get next to you for a nice, quiet talk. We knowed you was gettin' pretty well along in years, an'——"

Old Pete suddenly laughed. He pointed a lean finger at the outlaw. "I'm goin' to show you jaspers somethin'," he said. "You been listenin' to a pack of lies about my bones gettin' squeaky, an' all that sort of rot, but it ain't so. I'm goin' to show you."

"What do you mean?"

"Plenty! In the first place, I'm goin' to sleep right here in this jail to-night. Don't give a damn if you've got forty friends left on the outside, you're stayin' here. Get that?

"Then," he continued, "I'm takin' you across the county line in the mornin' where you'll stand trial for murder an' bank robbin'. Them words simple enough to soak through your thick heads?"

Boots Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Way things look," he surmised, "Sonoro County won't have to wait till election to get a new sheriff. There'll be another'n by noon to-morrow. You wait an' see, old man."

The sheriff smiled grimly. He turned away from the cell, walking across to the outer door. He opened it. Standing half outside, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"You're makin' a mistake, Boots," he said; "a big one. An', like my old daddy used to claim when he worked for the railroad over in Dodge City, you can't never tell when a mistake is goin' to cost a man plenty."

Pete Tully closed the door. He hurried down the street and then crossed over to The Golden Dipper. A curious crowd had formed there

since the arrest, but they edged out of his path as he pushed through to the rear end of the bar.

Old Pete noted, with considerable satisfaction, that a number of admiring grins greeted his entry. It made him feel much better. Evidently folks were beginning to change their minds about his being too old for the job.

He motioned for a chunky, bull-necked barkeep to come closer. "Where's Tony?" he asked, as the man paused in front of him.

"Gone out to rustle some coal oil," replied the barkeep. "Two of our lamps is plumb dry, an' we ain't got a drop." He reached under the sticky counter. "These what you're lookin' for?" he asked. He produced the weapons that old Pete had just taken from Boots Gordon and his men.

"Yeah. Much obliged."

THE SHERIFF gathered up the two guns and the knife and walked out of the door. He nearly bumped into Tony as the swarthy little proprietor stepped on the walk.

"Didn't mean to do it," Tony said nervously. "Was in a hurry. Didn't see you."

"That's all right. Say," remarked the sheriff, "I've got an extra supply of coal oil over at the office, in case you didn't find any."

"Coal oil? Sure, thanks, Mr. Tully. If I ever run out, I remember." Tony darted around the officer and disappeared inside the building.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. He was half in the notion of following because he wanted to talk with that barkeep again. For some mysterious reason, the fellow had deliberately lied to him.

Old Pete decided to let it pass for the present, though. This Boots Gordon affair was vastly more important, and the old sheriff didn't want to take any chances on the outlaws getting loose while he traced down something else that probably wouldn't amount to a great deal.

Accordingly, he returned to the jail. He noted that his prisoners were squatting with their backs to the sheet-iron wall, smoking. They did not even look up as he entered.

He placed their weapons in a heavy wooden chest and locked it. Taking out three large notebooks, he sat down at his desk and began checking over some of his back records that he expected to be investigated before the election.

The evening passed quietly. The only bits of conversation were unintelligible whisperings among the prisoners themselves and to which old Pete paid no attention.

Sonoro, his county, was not a lawless region. It never had been. However, those adjoining on the west and south were. It was this constant threat that Sonoro would eventually face similar troubles that had started a certain element to suggesting a younger man for the office of sheriff.

Pete Tully, they claimed, was just a fine old fellow who had been unusually lucky. That luck wouldn't last forever. What the county was going to need in the future was a hard-riding, fast-shooting man whom the neighboring desperadoes would be more apt to avoid—some one, for instance, like young Charley Haines. Haines had never had any experience as an officer, but plenty of the younger folks were willing to gamble that he could take care of the job.

Old Pete knew of these mutterings. They hurt him, too—hurt like knife slashes whenever he heard them. He wanted that job for him-

self for another term. He needed it as a means of raising the extra money for stocking his little ranch farther back in the hills, and he needed it for another reason. His pride!

When the time came for him to surrender the star he had worn for five consecutive two-year terms, he wanted it to be done through his own resignation and not because a majority of the voters figured that he was too old and out of date.

Pete Tully held these views because he still believed in himself. Nowhere in his make-up was there the slightest doubt that he could fill the position just as efficiently as young Charley Haines, or anybody else, for that matter.

Too old? He scoffed at the idea. There hadn't been a major holdup in his county at any time during his terms of office. If there should be —— Well, he was plenty young to take up the trail.

It was shortly before nine thirty when he rose from his seat behind the desk. He stretched himself to his full height, throwing his arms far to either side. He glanced over at his prisoners. Boots was slouched lazily in one corner. The tall fellow and the Mexican were both lying flat on their backs, apparently asleep.

Old Pete strolled over to the door. He stepped outside, leaving it ajar. The little street was quite dark by this time, except for The Golden Dipper which seemed to be doing its usual night's business. Old Pete wandered part way down the street, watching the place idly, and then turned back to the jail. It was nearly bedtime.

He sauntered through the opening. Just as he turned to close the door, a figure jumped from behind it. The sheriff whirled, clawing for his gun. Too late! Before his hand even touched the butt, a hard muzzle jolted him in the ribs. He tensed, standing motionless.

"Reach!" The command cracked like a rifle shot.

OLD PETE lowered his gaze to the six-gun. He saw that the hammer was back. Slowly, his hands started upward. He raised his eyes to scan the leering face of Boots Gordon.

"Come on, grandpap," gloated Boots. "Reach!"

Suddenly old Pete's left fist darted forward. He caught the outlaw a glancing blow on the cheek. He ducked to one side, swinging again. This time, he missed. Before he could regain his balance, the Mexican had dived for his feet. They fell to the floor. Boots Gordon crouched just above him. He poked the gun muzzle within an inch of old Pete's flushed face.

"One more move, old man," he growled, "an' I'll spill your brains all over the floor! You lay still!"

There was no choice. With the Mexican gripping him around the knees and the tall outlaw now clamping his waist, old Pete was helpless.

Boots Gordon straightened up. "Go through his pockets," he ordered. "Lay out everything. Hang on, Juan, while Lanky makes the search."

It didn't take long.

Inside a minute, old Pete's gun, his keys, watch, a few odd coins, and his bill fold, all lay in a heap on the floor. Boots Gordon shoved them over with his foot so that they would be out of the sheriff's reach, and then bent down to examine the key ring.

He singled out one he thought would fit and hurried over to the chest. Returning shortly after-

ward with their weapons, he handed them back to his companions.

"What'll we do with him, Boots? Tie him up?"

"No. He'd likely raise too much fuss. Somebody would be sure to hear an' come snoopin' around."

The Mexican rose up on his knees. He patted his knife suggestively. "This no make noise," he said. "Shall I give it the use?"

Boots hesitated for an instant and then shook his head. "No," he decided. "I've got a better idea. We'll take the old coot along with us."

Tiptoeing over to the desk, he rummaged through the drawers until he found a pair of steel handcuffs. He looked at them carefully. Satisfied, apparently, that they were in good condition, he came back to old Pete.

"If you make any noise," he warned, "or try to give an alarm, you'll die—die just as quick as I can pull a trigger. Understand? Now, get up from there!"

Old Pete, madder than he had ever been in his life before, crawled to his feet. His bony fists opened and shut convulsively. He glanced about the place, desperately hunting for any sort of scheme that might give him a chance. He didn't find any.

Boots Gordon stepped around behind him and caught hold of his shirt collar. With his other hand, he jabbed the gun against old Pete's waist. "Lanky" and the Mexican led the way outside. They circled the corner and hurried to the rear of the long building. It was quite dark and they were unobserved.

THE INSTANT they headed west along the alley, old Pete realized what they were planning to do. The knowledge sickened him. Once he stopped, refusing to go any farther. That gun muzzle quickly persuaded him, however, and he resumed his stubborn march.

The Sonoroville railroad station was about a hundred yards beyond the last small shack, and a faint flicker of light showed from its dingy windows. The outlaws made directly for the station.

At the big door in front, they stopped for Boots to search through his stolen key ring. He found the proper key, fitted it to the lock, and shoved the door open. The rest trouped in as he stood aside. Another lock barred them from the inner office, but Boots Gordon quickly found the key for this one also. There was nobody inside, but the agent had left a small lantern turned low.

Boots glanced around the place hurriedly. He nodded to his men and they ushered the sheriff inside, lining him up near a window on the side that faced the tracks. Boots, scowling viciously, sauntered over in front of him.

"Now, old man," he said, "the rest is up to you. If you try pullin' any hero stuff, Juan's knife is gonna shut you up for good. Somebody will find you here in the mornin'—dead. Understand? That's in case you try to put up a fight. If you don't, an' show some sense, we'll just leave you tied up. Well," he asked, "what do you say?"

Old Pete said nothing. The outlaw watched him for a brief moment and then turned to his two companions.

"Pull one of his wrists on either side of that signal lever," he ordered, "an' handcuff them together. That'll hold him."

Submitting sullenly, the sheriff felt the handcuffs snap into place. It was a simple, easy way of tying

him and one that he knew would be effective. Although he could move his feet about as he pleased, there was no possible chance for him to release himself.

He watched helplessly as they battered into the old-fashioned safe across the room, and he had to bite his lips to keep from yelling when he saw that they had discovered its contents. There was a small fortune in the safe, the shipment having arrived that evening for delivery to the Pecos mines on the next pay day.

Boots Gordon drew out the heavy canvas bag and opened it eagerly. His face broke into a broad grin. He held the bag over for his companions to see. Then he rose to his feet. He turned to Pete Tully.

"Much obliged!" he said gloatingly. "We're sure lucky that Sonoraville lets its sheriff carry keys to all the business houses. Yeah! Much obliged, old man! You sure come in handy."

Old Pete clenched his fists behind his back so tightly that the cords stood out in his wrists. Hot blood rushed to his face, turning it a deep purple.

"I'll get you, you dirty skunks!" he muttered. "I'll get you if it takes the rest of my life! An' I'll get Tony for sneakin' you that gun!"

"What good's it gonna do to catch us?" sneered the outlaw. "That old crate of yours is leaky. We'd just walk out again."

"I'll show you! Say," old Pete asked abruptly, lowering his tone, "how did you devils ever manage to get that cell open?"

The three exchanged grins.

"By takin' the key away from your deputy this afternoon," explained Boots boastfully. "Juan kept it hid in his mouth, all the time you was a-searchin' us. Understand now? Maybe a young man would have got wise, but we figured an old coot like you wouldn't ever catch on, an' you didn't.

"But we're wastin' time," Boots added hastily. "I got somethin' else to do to you before we leave this dump—somethin' that will give folks a plenty good laugh at their grandpap sheriff in the mornin'."

He winked at his companions. They laughed, knowing exactly what he meant.

Five minutes later, the three slipped noiselessly out of the station, leaving an old man furiously helpless on the inside. They crept along the building, listening as they went, and continued on down the track for about a hundred yards. At Boots' suggestion, they turned off and crouched behind a near-by mesquite shrug.

They didn't have long to wait.

A SHRILL whistle soon sounded from their left and, an instant later, a long freight train rounded the curve and came rapidly toward them. As the engine approached, brakes began to screech. The waiting men remained motionless until the engine had passed, and then raced over to the cars and swung into an open doorway as the train slowed down for the station.

Lanky and the Mexican retreated to a far corner. Boots, however, scrambled to his feet and stayed in the doorway. He watched both ends of the train anxiously, but saw no sign of brakemen or other officials. The train did not come to a complete stop and was soon under full speed again. Boots, relieved, joined his companions.

"Looks like a cinch," he commented, squatting beside them.

"Sure! Only town between here

an' the State line is White Deer, an' it ain't as big as this one was. Don't reckon we'll even slow down there."

"Unless," muttered Boots thoughtfully, "the fireman decides to take on water. There's a big tank on the yon side of town, about two miles. That's the only thing that's gonna stop us."

Boots Gordon was wrong.

The train did stop at White Deer, and it wasn't for water. Hardly had the heavy wheels stopped their monotonous rumble, when footsteps sounded on the gravel outside. Suddenly, without warning, the door of their car was jammed shut. They heard the catch slip into place.

"Sit down, you idiot!" growled Boots, as Lanky half drew his gun and started to rise. "It won't do us no good, now. Wait till we get across the line. Then we can make a—— Damnation! We're goin' the wrong way!"

DURING the next fifteen minutes, the outlaws tugged and pried at both doors as the train sped rapidly backward. Their efforts availed them nothing. Given plenty of time, they might have hammered some of the boards loose with their gun butts, or the Mexican might have succeeded in whittling out a hole with his knife. However, they didn't have the time.

Before they could realize what was happening, the train lurched to a stop. Outside, voices called to one another excitedly. Lantern beams filtered through the narrow cracks.

A few minutes later, heavy pounding rattled the door.

"You jaspers willin' to surrender?"

"Damnation!" muttered Boots. "It's that old coot of a sheriff!"

"Come on!" Pete Tully yelled impatiently. "If you don't surrender, we'll riddle the car!"

The trapped men made no answer. A bullet splintered the woodwork. It was followed by another, almost instantly. Both shots were high.

"How about it?" called old Pete again. "Are you willin' to surrender?"

Still, the men made no answer. Another time, that six-gun roared. This shot tore a hole dangerously close to them. They scooted along the floor to the far side.

The Mexican suddenly pounded on the floor. "*Si, señor!*" he yelled. "We geev up!"

"How about you, Boots?"

The outlaw hesitated, looking about wildly. "Yes," he agreed; "we'll give up. What in hell else can a man do?"

"All right," Pete Tully responded. "Just remember, though—no funny stuff. If you try to plug me, there's more guns ready to cut you down."

After a few seconds fumbling, the door slid open jerkily. A man's hand showed, for just a second, as a lantern was placed in the doorway. The three men slouched into view. From somewhere in the half circle of darkness, Sheriff Pete Tully called:

"Haul out your guns! Lay them on the floor where we can see them. You, too, Juan! That knife!"

The prisoners obeyed sullenly. Following old Pete's next command, they climbed from the car. Stern-faced trainmen surrounded them. The engineer, a big fellow in greasy overalls, produced a rope. While he helped the sheriff tie the prisoners, others secured the stolen money.

Old Pete grinned at the engineer. "This jasper here," he said, pointing to Boots Gordon, "claims Sonoro County needs a younger man for sheriff. Reckon he's right. Anyway, I'm goin' to resign as soon as I

get that nice reward money for haulin' him in. It will fix me up pretty good, seein' as I'm gettin' old."

Boots Gordon turned on him sharply. "How the hell did you do it?" he asked.

The sheriff laughed. "Wasn't so bad," he said, "even if I am gettin' old. Of course, you jaspers made it a heap easier for me."

"How's that?"

Again the sheriff laughed. He laid a hand on the outlaw's shoulder, shaking him vigorously.

"Don't you remember me tellin' you that my old daddy used to work for the railroad? Well, he taught me somethin' about a telegraph key—not much, but enough so's I could send a hurry message to White Deer an' tell them what to do. Savvy?"

The outlaw shook his head. "But your hands," he protested. "Your hands were fastened so you couldn't even move them."

"Didn't have to," Pete Tully replied, with a grin that stretched his old features nearly to the breaking point. "Didn't you jaspers run off with my boots an' leave me there barefoot?"

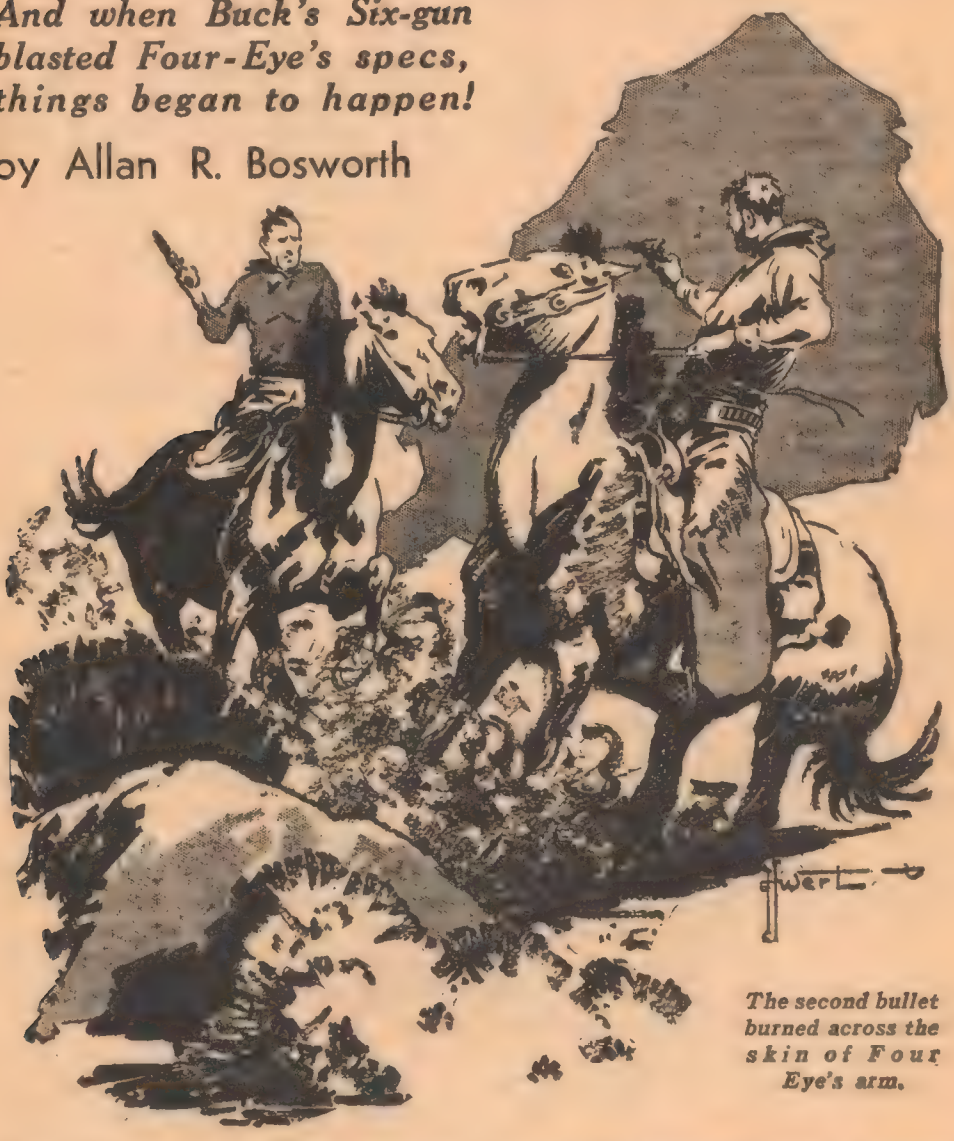
"You mean, that you sent that message with your feet?"

A roar of applause broke from the trainmen as the old-timer nodded assent.

Hosses Can't Read

And when Buck's Six-gun blasted Four-Eye's specs, things began to happen!

by Allan R. Bosworth



The second bullet burned across the skin of Four Eye's arm.

DUST and cusswords floated from the corral. The dust cleared and revealed five 7N waddies sitting on a blindfolded hunk of fury that was wrapped in horsehide and tied with a hackamore and a cinch strap. Pete Sayers, grizzled 7N foreman, waved a weary hand.

"He's all yours, Four-Eye! Come on and tame him!"

"Four-Eye" Hopkins, lanky, towheaded, and bespectacled, was perched atop the corral fence, read-

ing from a book. Hastily he turned another page:

> Remember confidence is a cardinal point when attempting to tame any wild animal. Never hesitate, never let the animal suspect you fear him. Approach him firmly, look him squarely in the eye and let him know at once that an indomitable will can master brute strength. There is a hypnotic——

"Hey! Come on, Four-Eye!"

Pete Sayers was growing impatient. It was he who sat on the head of the roan outlaw, and his position was none too secure.

"Four-Eye ain't in no hurry. He's afraid to tackle that Pile Driver hoss. Want to back out, Four-Eye?"

The tow-headed waddy flushed as he heard "Buck" Coryell's taunt from the opposite fence. Through the thinning fog of dust, he could see the sneer on Coryell's dark, coarse-featured face. He gritted his teeth.

Four-Eye closed the book and placed it on the top of a fence post. He had memorized enough to try it out on this bronc that had piled Coryell and practically every other rider on the 7N.

The four-year-old roan had never been ridden, and Pete Sayers had named him Pile Driver the first time a buster forked him, because, as Pete explained, "he piles you first, then tries to drive you into the ground with his hoofs."

"Somebody," Pete had announced, "has got to go to Chicago with me to help take care o' that shipment of beef steers. All right. The first hombre to ride Pile Driver gets the trip."

And now Four-Eye Hopkins, doing his best to exude confidence and will power, ambled across the corral with a gangling gait. He stooped to lift the *tapaojos* from Pile Driver's eyes.

"Don't you do that!" barked Pete. "We got trouble enough, holdin' him down, so don't you go lettin' him see! Climb on, and grab yourself a handful of Hades."

"But I've got to look him in the eye!" protested Four-Eye. "The book says that's the way they cow wild animals."

"Yeah; but this wild animal ain't no cow! He's jest a wall-eyed bronc, and he wouldn't sabe! Come on—straddle him!"

The procedure wasn't according to the book. Four-Eye wanted to back out. Then he heard Buck Coryell's laugh.

"I told you the kid is afraid! Come on, let the hoss up, or let me try ridin' him again. I can do it this time."

"Keep out o' this!" retorted Four-Eye.

He threw a long leg over Pile Driver's heaving, dust-streaked barrel, and found the stirrups. He seized the hackamore firmly.

"'Indomitable will can master brute strength! Indomitable will can master brute strength! Indomitable will——"

Over and over he ran the magic words through his mind without moving his tightly set, white lips. Other men tamed wild animals, and if Pile Driver wasn't wild, he was nothing.

"Let 'im go!"

The 7N waddies sprang clear and scurried for the safety of the corral bars. "Ranse" Porter, astride a sorrel cow pony, shook a narrow loop in his reata and rode out into the corral. He was acting as pick-up man; it was his task to keep the roan from trampling his rider after the fall.

"Ride him, cowboy!"

PILE DRIVER lurched to his feet and arched his back high as Pete Sayers jerked the *tapaojos* from his wicked eyes. The next instant he had leaped as though his legs were made of spring steel. There was a twisting, rocketing motion to the jump that slammed Four-Eye's weight to the left stirrup.

Wham!

Pile Driver landed. His hoofs were bunched, his legs stiff as seasoned fence posts. His back was unyielding. He lowered his head until it was almost in the dust of the corral, then he pitched again.

Four-Eye Hopkins clamped his knees desperately under the swell of his saddle forks. He raked the roan's sweating hide with his spur rowels, and he grabbed the battered Stetson from his head and dusted Pile Driver's flanks while they were in the air.

"Yip-eee! Watch the kid go!"

Pete Sayer's triumphant shout ended in a gasp. There was a straining, snapping sound. The saddle suddenly left Pile Driver's back; there was daylight between the forks and the bronc's hide.

Crash!

The saddle twisted. Four-Eye Hopkins went sidewise, over Pile Driver's flattened ears, and sprawled on the ground. The bronc squealed and whirled toward him with stabbing, cutting hoofs.

Rance Porter spurred the sorrel forward and ran him between the wall-eyed, killer-man roan and the man on the ground. He slammed his loop over Pile Driver's head at arm's length, and jerked the outlaw out of reach.

Pete Sayer and a couple of the 7N punchers leaped to the ground and rushed for Four-Eye in a stilted run. As they reached the tall waddy's side, he sat up, gasping for breath.

"I'm—I'm—all right!" he panted. "But lemme see—that cinch strap! It hadn't ought—to have busted!"

Lifting the saddle, he got to his feet and limped toward the fence, groping like a man who is half blind. Pete Sayers saw what was wrong and stooped to pick Four-Eye's thick-lensed glasses from the ground. The tall waddy was very nearsighted.

"Here you are, Four-Eye!" the foreman said, putting the spectacles in his hand. "Here—I'll look at the cinch, myself."

He turned the broad strap over in his hand while Hopkins wiped the dirt from his glasses. Then he ripped out a cussword.

"Look at this! It's been cut on the under side! Of all the dirty, low-down tricks! I can whip the skunk that done this!"

Four-Eye grabbed the cinch. An angry wave of red swept into his freckled face as he saw that Sayers was right. The strap was cut half through, and the strain had done the rest. Four-Eye shot a glance at Buck Coryell. The dark-faced man wore an amused smile.

"Did you do this, Coryell?" demanded the tall rider.

Coryell's smile vanished. "Are you accusin' me?" he asked hotly, dropping his hand menacingly toward his right hip.

Pete Sayers saw the .45 that was holstered low at Coryell's side. He stepped between, shoving the dark-faced man back.

"Easy, now!" he warned. "Keep your dew-claws away from that gun! Four-Eye ain't heeled, and, besides, I won't have no gun play. Sabe?"

"Well, there cain't nobody accuse me of cuttin' that cinch!" Coryell snarled.

"Nobody else here is skunk enough to do it!" flared Four-Eye Hopkins. "I'm sayin' you——"

"Shut up, both of you!" roared Sayers. "We'll forget about it. You ain't hurt, Four-Eye, so we'll forget about it. I'd hate to think that any man who works for the 7N would pull that low-down stunt, but I reckon we can't find out who done it. Now—shut up! You can try ridin' Pile Driver again, kid—and next time we'll look at the saddle!"

Four-Eye nodded, his jaw set hard. Buck Coryell sneered. The 7N punchers left the corral and trooped toward the ranch house.

Ranse Porter tried to ease the tension. He slapped Four-Eye on the back as the tall waddy was buckling on his cartridge belt and holstered gun.

"It was a good ride, son!" Ranse announced. "Trouble is, a hoss can't read! So, you have a hard time makin' him believe that book learnin'."

There was a general laugh at this. Pete Sayers looked back at the dust-shrouded corral and shook his head.

"He's sure tough, but we're wearin' him down!" declared the foreman. "We've saddled him so much now that he's gettin' to where he'll stand for that. Mebbe if we keep on, ridin' him will be the same way. I'm goin' to keep him corralled, and I'm goin' to keep a saddle on him as much as I can."

THERE was less than a week left for Four-Eye to make his second attempt at riding Pile Driver. The 7N was busy from dawn till sundown, rounding up and cutting out beef steers for the shipment to Chicago. A commission buyer rode out from Pecos Junction, inspected the herd, and announced he was satisfied. He was coming back the next day with the pay-off money.

"Who's going with us on the train?" he asked Sayers.

"That ain't been settled, yet. You see, I've dangled that trip before the boys as a prize. They nearly all took a shot at ridin' an outlaw bronc I want busted. They all got piled. So I may have to let 'em draw straws."

Four-Eye Hopkins kept right on reading from the book on how to tame and train wild animals. He was deep in the chapter which dealt with the hypnotic powers of the human eye, and he went out and tried it on his own cow pony, a sleepy-eyed, slow-footed roan. But nothing happened.

"I reckon thick glasses like these sure spoil the hypnotic powers of your eye!" mourned the studious puncher. "And it's like Ranse says—a hoss can't read!"

Sayers gave him the job of greasing the divide windmill the next morning, and Four-Eye obediently rode four miles north, climbed the steep slope that dropped away from the wide, mesquite-dotted tableland, and mounted the thirty-five-foot tower. The mill was greased in ten minutes, but Four-Eye lingered, enjoying the view.

Away down there to the south, looking like a blue cloud on the horizon, were the Santa Rosa mountains in Mexico. He could see the Pecos canyon, far over on the right. The ranch house was practically at hand in such clear atmosphere, and——

Four-Eye wiped his glasses. He saw two riders, heading toward the ranch, a gray horse and a black horse. That would be Sayers and the commission buyer—the commission man rode a gray. They dipped down into a draw, where the

green willows shrouded them from view for a minute. Now they were out on the other side and heading over the point of a low hill——

The windmill watcher gasped. He caught the glint of sun on blue-barrel steel even before he saw the man leap into the trail in front of the two riders. The next instant was breath-taking with grim drama.

"Look out!" yelled Four-Eye Hopkins, forgetting that he was more than a mile away.

A tiny puff of smoke belched from the ambusher's gun. Four-Eye saw the foreman sagging, dropping from the saddle. The gun spat more smoke, and the man on the gray horse fell. Distance-dulled gun thunder came rolling to the ears of the waddy on the windmill platform.

Bang! Br-raang!

He couldn't see what the ambusher was doing, now, except that he was stooping over one of his victims. Then he straightened, ducked into the bushes, and came out of them on a horse. He headed down over the point of the hill, toward the 7N ranch house.

Four-Eye's jaw clamped shut with determination. He went down the windmill ladder two rungs at a step, risking a bad fall and getting splinters in his hands. He forked the sleepy-eyed roan.

"Come on, wake up!" he shouted. "Lay your belly in the sand! I got to tame somethin' worse than a wild animal—I got to pile the twine on a murderer!"

The roan broke into a lumbering gallop. Four-Eye headed him down through the mesquites and scrub live oaks of the hill slope, and went across the mesquite flat with the chaparral tearing at his clothes and threatening to scratch him out of the saddle.

Three miles—two miles to the ranch. The ambushing gunman didn't have quite so far to go. He'd probably beat Four-Eye to the house.

No use trying to get help. The other waddies were riding in a far-flung, fan-shaped formation, combing the west pasture for strays that might have been overlooked in the herd. They'd be miles away at this hour.

FOUR-EYE dusted out of the flat and over the hill. Less than a mile, now. The ranch windmill and the adobe buildings loomed suddenly. The tall rider gave his horse quirt and spur. For he saw a man dismount and ground-rein his horse in front of the corrals—and the man looked like Buck Coryell.

For the space of a quarter of a mile, Four-Eye was down in the brush and could not see the ranch buildings. Then he rode out of the chaparral and halted by the corral gate. Everything was ominously quiet at the 7N.

The tall waddy peered through his thick glasses. Yes; it was Coryell. His horse was still there, in the pen with Pile Driver, and both cayuses were still saddled. Coryell would probably be in the bunk house, getting his things ready——

Braang!

A bullet chipped splinters from the heavy gate. Four-Eye whirled. The shot came from the ranch house itself; blue smoke was whipping away from an open window.

"Get away from them hosses!" came Coryell's warning. "And get away from the ranch house! Sabe?"

Four-Eye jerked the bar of the gate, yanked the roan inside, and slammed the gate shut. Another howling slug buried deep in the gatepost.

"Get goin', I tell you!" Coryell shouted. "I'm comin' out!"

"Come on!" retorted the tall puncher. "I saw what you did! I saw you shoot Pete and the cattle buyer. Better give up!"

His answer was another spurt of roaring flame from the window, another bullet screaming past. Four-Eye jerked the .45 out of his holster and started on a run for the back door of the ranch house.

Braang!

That bullet nicked the crown of his Stetson. He ducked involuntarily, much too late. He triggered and sent a heavy slug into the window. Plaster rattled on the floor of the room where Coryell crouched.

Then, as the tall waddy neared the back steps, he heard the heavier man's boots hammering the floor, running toward the back door. He jerked up the heavy six-gun as he reached the steps, and let it roar——

Braang!

Coryell howled, spun halfway around as he grabbed at his left shoulder, and dropped to his knees. Four-Eye, a yell of triumph on his lips, leaped forward.

Braang!

Coryell's slug struck the adobe wall at the edge of the door. It glanced, a flattened, whizzing missile of lead, traveling upward.

Four-Eye, just in the act of yanking the trigger with his gun squarely on the kneeling killer, felt the world rise and strike him between the eyes. He staggered backward and fell—fell through a whirling, dazzling burst of fireworks for what seemed an age—fell into a black, bottomless void.

"That'll learn you, you four-eyed pup!" snarled Coryell, gritting his teeth with the pain of his shoulder wound. He lurched to his feet, stepped across the tall puncher's inert body, and staggered toward the corral.

Four-Eye Hopkins came to with the sun in his eyes and a throbbing, pounding ache in his head. He groaned and felt his forehead. There was a knot between his eyes, the skin of his forehead was torn, and his fingers came away stained crimson. He fought his way to his feet.

Down toward the mesquites, keeping time to the aching throb of his brain, a horse's hoofs were hammering. Buck Coryell—getting away, heading for the Rio Grande with the money he had taken from the cattle buyer and Pete Sayers! Why, Four-Eye couldn't have been unconscious more than a couple of minutes—Coryell was not far away and——

The tall cowboy whirled toward the corral. Two steps and he realized something was wrong. He couldn't see very far. His glasses were gone.

He found them. Stooping close to the ground, he picked them up. They were shattered at the nose bridge by the glancing bullet, and Buck Coryell's boot heel had smashed one of the lenses. Four-Eye shoved the broken remains into his pocket and jammed his fallen six-gun into his holster. Then he ran to the corral.

The sleepy-eyed roan was in a far corner of the pen. Four-Eye saw him dimly and headed for him with a rush. He cornered the horse, grabbed bridle reins and found the stirrup before the animal had a chance to escape. The gate was open. Four-Eye hit the saddle and jerked the roan's head around.

Wham!

The roan went high, wide, and handsome before the puncher had fairly found the other stirrup. Four-Eye nearly lost his seat as the

horse landed. The breath jolted out of him and he sucked in a startled gasp.

It wasn't the slow-footed roan at all. He was astride the only horse Buck Coryell had left in the corral —Pile Driver!

THE SUDDEN realization swept through Four-Eye and left him weak, so weak that he grabbed leather and clung grimly to the saddle horn through a series of spine-snapping bucks. Then a wave of anger burned the weakness out of his body, and he steadied himself with his knees clamped grimly under the saddle forks.

The saddle was all right, this time. He'd ride this bronc to a fare-thee-well! He'd ride him, and he'd overtake Buck Coryell on the trail to the Rio! *Yipeee!*

Wham! Crash!

Pile Driver raged and tore around the corral, with cutting, stabbing hoofs stirring a choking swirl of dust. Four-Eye Hopkins saw the corral fence rising, falling, twisting, like the horizon of a stormy sea. Pile Driver landed and sunfished, Pile Driver swallowed his head as though he intended to turn himself inside out and get a hair-lined stomach——

Crash!

Four-Eye bit his tongue as that jarring jolt caught him with his mouth open in a gasp for breath. He raked the outlaw with his spurs, slammed him viciously with his quirt. He kept a tight grip on the bridle, and jerked the roan's head high.

Wham!

Another sickening, rib-tearing leap, another tooth-jarring landing. Then Pile Driver's wicked little red-rimmed eyes saw the open gate. He squealed and hurtled through it, out into the open where his devilish maneuvers had room——

Crash!

Four-Eye swung his quirt around the bronc's flattened ears. The horse suddenly changed his tactics. With the bit in his teeth, he broke into a dead run.

The corral fence and the windmill flashed by, a sickening blur in the corner of the rider's straining eyes. He yanked hard on the reins. The road that wound down toward the Rio Grande and Mexico streaked under the outlaw's hoofs. Four-Eye drew his first free breath in what seemed like an hour.

"Keep goin', hoss!" he gasped. "Keep goin'!"

Pile Driver kept going, with his dusty, sweat-streaked barrel heaving against the cinch, against Four-Eye's grimly clamped, bowed legs. A mesquite limb raked the length of the bronc's hide and snagged a six-inch hole in the rider's chaps. Pile Driver squealed again and veered back to the center of the road.

Buck Coryell would be holding to the road, making time while he could. Once across the river, and he would be hard to catch. Four-Eye Hopkins leaned forward tensely, straining his nearsighted vision.

Zzzzzit!

The bullet that streaked past his ears sounded like a bee in a hurry. The roar of Coryell's gun came dimly above the staccato clatter of Pile Driver's hoofs.

Four-Eye set his jaw and ducked a little lower over his saddle horn. No use wasting his ammunition.

Braang!

That one was closer. Buck Coryell was making a stand. Buck was telling himself it was impossible that the gangling youth was riding Pile Driver. But here he came,

blasting down the chaparral-bordered trail in a fury of speed.

There was too much dust for Coryell to see that Four-Eye had lost his glasses. The killer cursed the pain in his shoulder and whipped up the heavy .45 in desperation. He blazed away at the charging cowboy.

Bang! Braang!

The second bullet burned across the skin of Four-Eye's arm. The tall waddy straightened in his saddle with a grimace of pain. Through the fogging dust that swirled up as Pile Driver planted all four hoofs and slid, he saw the blurred form of the other horse and rider.

Four-Eye heard the gun roar once more. The vivid slash of flame hit the dust. Pile Driver saved him by lurching to the left to avoid colliding with Coryell's horse. Then the killer's hammer fell on an empty shell.

CORYELL ripped out a snarling oath and hurled the weapon at the other man. It missed. In the next instant, fearing to trust his aim without his glasses, Four-Eye leaped out of his saddle as though bulldogging a steer.

Crash!

He landed squarely on Coryell and bore him to the ground. They hit in a rolling, struggling heap, dangerously near the frightened horses' hoofs. Four-Eye Hopkins was on top, then underneath. He doubled up his long legs, shot them out and upward, and rolled clear.

Buck Coryell, snarling like a trapped animal, sprang at him. The tall cowboy struck out blindly with both fists. He broke through the other man's guard and landed hard on Coryell's jaw.

The killer went down again. Four-Eye was on top of him in a split second. He jerked out the .45 and jammed it hard into Coryell's ribs.

"Stay on the ground, you double-crossin' coyote!" he panted. "If you try to get up, I'll blow a hole in you!"

Coryell did not answer or move. He was out cold from that crack on the jaw. Four-Eye Hopkins turned him over, ripped the bandanna off his neck, and tied the killer's hands tightly behind him.

Then he got to his feet, swaying a little as he looked around. Coryell's horse was still there. Yes—and so was Pile Driver. The outlaw bronc stood meekly, head down, sides heaving as he blew.

"Well, I reckon you are busted this time!" panted the tall waddy. "You'll make a swell saddle hoss, with all that speed, and——"

He whirled. A rider was coming down the road. Four-Eye could see him but vaguely at that distance. There was no telling what accomplices Buck Coryell might have had. The tall puncher whipped up his gun.

"Stop right where you are!" he roared. "Who is it?"

"It's me—Pete Sayers! What's the matter, you locoed galoot, don't you know me?"

Sayers came closer. He was twisted in his saddle, holding his right side. Even Four-Eye could see the dark stain that spread across the foreman's shirt.

"My glasses is busted!" he explained. "I thought you was killed. I seen it all from the windmill—before my glasses got busted."

"He didn't kill me!" returned Sayers grimly. "Miller is dead—Coryell killed him and took the money off'n him. Five thousand dollars! How in the heck did you happen to tail onto him?"

Four-Eye grinned and pointed toward Pile Driver. "Rode the cyclone, there!"

Sayers gasped. Buck Coryell stirred and struggled, glaring up at the two men. The foreman dismounted painfully and walked over to the side of the killer. From Coryell's trousers pocket, he extracted a fat roll of greenbacks.

"Reckon it's all here—you ain't had a chance to spend none of it!" he said. "And you thought the kid couldn't ride Pile Driver!"

"Shut up!" growled Coryell.

Sayers turned to the tall waddy. "How did you do it?" he asked. "Power o' will, accordin' to the book?"

"Nope; I reckon not!" Four-Eye grinned. "You see, confidence is all it takes, and I had plenty of that because when I climbed on that bronc, I thought I was gettin' on board ol' Slow-foot. Then, when I was on, I couldn't get off."

"Well, I reckon the book had somethin' to do with it, after all," Sayers mused. "Think mebbe all the boys ought to study it. And it sure is too bad hosses can't read—we'd let all the broomtails read how a man can cow 'em with the hypnotic eye. Come on, Four-Eye; let's help this hombre on his hoss. You and me got to get to a doctor so we can get fixed up for that trip to Chicago."

The sort of a story that just comes to us once in a while

HALFWAY TO HELLANGONE

by

FORBES PARKHILL

In the April Issue Of Cowboy Stories Don't Miss it!

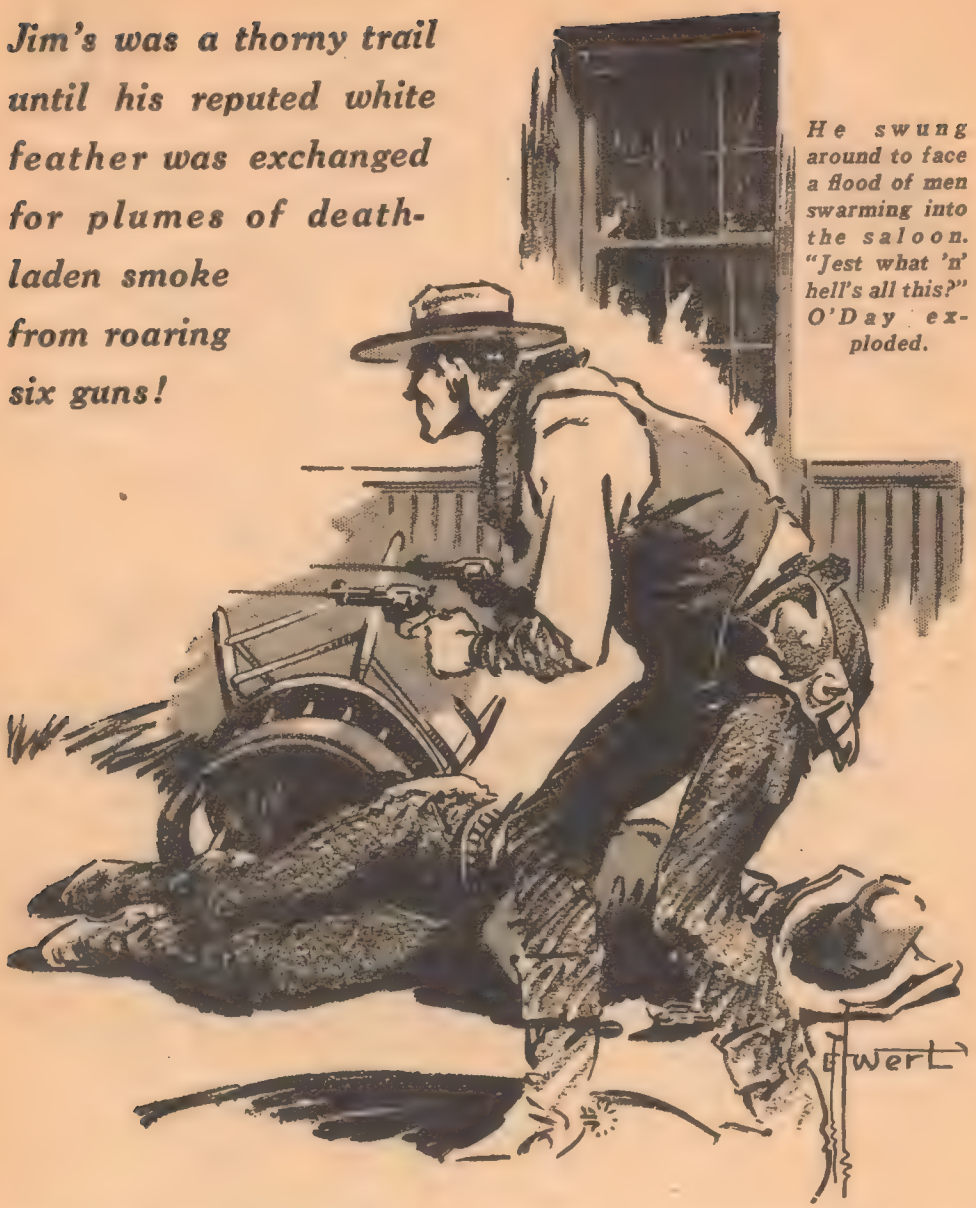
by
Carl N. Taylor

PEACEMAKER'S SON

TIGHT-LIPPED and bitter, Jim Clayton rode home from Piedras Negras. He had gone to town to investigate the disappearance of some valuable breeding stock, and now he wished that he had stayed at home. For he had learned that his partner and kid brother, wild, unreasonable Dave Clayton, was the one who had sold their jointly owned cattle.

In the three hard years since their father, grim old "Peacemaker" Clayton, had been killed in a gun fight, Jim had tried to guide Dave's steps. Through drifting gun smoke he had glimpsed their father as he really was—a hard, relentless sheriff of the

Jim's was a thorny trail until his reputed white feather was exchanged for plumes of death-laden smoke from roaring six guns!



He swung around to face a flood of men swarming into the saloon. "Jest what 'n' hell's all this?" O'Day exploded.

killing kind, wanting a reputation for his guns and paying for that ambition with his life.

Henceforth, Jim had never worn a gun. He had watched over Dave with a kind of fierce jealousy, determined to keep him from growing into the kind of man his father had been. A hard and thankless job, he had found it. He had preached the necessity of getting out of debt, of building up their ranch, of breeding life and vigor into their run-down herd. And now it appeared that he had made a mess of it—failed.

Two weeks ago Dave had demanded a division of their property. He was irked, he said, by Jim's stinginess, his old woman's ways, his bull-headed determination to make

money out of a run-down ranch. When Jim refused, they had quarreled bitterly.

"Then give me dad's guns and keep your blasted cattle!" Dave raged. "Those guns are mine. You've hidden 'em from me! I'm old enough to know what I'm doin' and almighty tired of your messin' around. Give me the guns, an' if'n I get in trouble, never mind about that. You don't owe me anything. All I want's a free hand to run my own business."

The coolness then engendered between them still lingered. In trying to smooth things over, Jim had only made matters worse. Dave took to spending most of his time in town, drinking heavily, running with a tough crowd, and gambling recklessly.

At the same time their cattle began to disappear, a fact which worried Jim but didn't appear to cause Dave much concern. Now Jim wondered if, perhaps, it wouldn't have been better to split the herd when Dave demanded it.

"Of course, it ain't as if half the cattle weren't his," he thought miserably, trying to excuse Dave as far as might be. "I reckon he had full right to sell what was his, if he wanted. But——"

There his reflections ended. Fundamentally right or wrong though Dave might be, Jim knew that his cherished dream of building up the ranch was on the skids.

A LIGHT was burning in the kitchen when Jim dropped his reins at the corral gate. Dismounting, he walked stiffly toward the house. Through the kitchen window, he saw Dave sitting at the table with a whisky bottle at his elbow.

To Jim, the kid had never looked so much like his father as he did now. A dozen times Jim had seen the old man sitting in that self-same position, his face darkened with that same heavy scowl, drinking copiously to dull his memory of a dead man's face.

Throwing open the door, Jim strode into the kitchen. For an instant he towered over his brother. Lips tightly compressed, he strove to keep back the bitter words. Dave raised his head, a dangerous light in his eyes, a leer twisting his stubborn, boyish features. Without speaking, he pulled a crumpled tobacco sack from his pocket. With insolent deliberation, he started to roll a "brownie" cigarette.

"Sumthin' on your mind, Jim?"

The question was harmless enough, but the manner of saying it was both an insult and a dare. It was a trick of taunting by inflection that Dave had inherited from his father. Their eyes clashed. Jim felt rising within him something that he feared and dreaded—a wave of unreasoning rage, his own inheritance from his killer father.

"You know what's on my mind!" His voice was a dry, harsh bark. "You've been sellin' our breedin' stock—you—you misbranded maverick!"

Dave's lips parted in a defiant grin. Ignoring the danger signals in Jim's blazing eyes and taut lips, he calmly poured himself a drink.

"Maybe I did an' maybe I didn't. What d'ye aim to do about'n it?"

Jim did not reply. In two quick strides he went around the table. Seizing Dave by the front of his shirt, he jerked him out of the chair. With an open-handed swing, he slapped him across the mouth. Following this with a quick left jab, he sent the youngster reeling into a corner.

"Damn you!"

Dave came storming back, a wild light blazing in his eyes, his battered lips twisted in a bloody grin. For an instant they sparred, then they clashed with furiously driving fists, and this time it was give and take.

They were not badly matched. Both were lank and rangy, tough as mountain cattle. In weight and reach Jim had a little the better of it, but this advantage was more than offset by Dave's superior speed and deadly punching ability.

Back and forth across the room they surged, exchanging blows that hurt severely. Pans clattered down from the walls. The table and chairs were overturned and kicked aside. Wordlessly, they fought their bitter battle. They went into a clinch, strove furiously to trip each other, and broke apart.

Then Dave made a wild swing and missed, laying himself open to attack. Jim flung himself forward, throwing all the strength of his hundred and eighty pounds of coiled muscle into a devastating uppercut. Dave hit the floor.

Instantly recovering, he came boring in again, his face twisted with tigerish fury. Jim moved as though to meet the attack and then did what was to Dave an utterly unexpected thing. Stepping back, he dropped his arms and shook his head.

"I won't fight you, Dave," he said dully. "This has gone far enough. Too far! I can't finish it—this way."

Dave stopped in his tracks. With a look that was a mixture of horror and unbelief, he watched his brother back away.

"What're you talkin' about?" he demanded savagely. "You started it, didn't you?"

"Yeh," Jim replied. "I started it, but I'm not finishin'. It ain't worth it."

"So that's your tune! Listen here, cowboy, you nor no one else can slap my face an' get away with it. Put up your mitts!"

"No; I'm through."

"The hell you say!"

Driving in with lowered head and scowling face, Dave began a slashing attack. Jim was sent reeling backward. A right to the face drove him against the wall, but he made no move to defend himself. Instead, he stood there wiping away the blood from a cut beneath his eye.

"By Judas, I believe you're yellow!" Dave spat bitterly.

"Maybe I am," Jim replied. "Call it by whatever name you want. I hadn't ought to have hit you, Dave, an' if you feel like I've got a lickin' comin', why jest pile on an' satisfy yourself. Me, I'm through. We've both got a strain of the devil in us, which same we got honest from dad. It's sumthin' to be fought against and overmastered, or else it'll do the same for us that it did for him and——"

"That's enough!" Dave rasped, his eyes angrily blazing. "Don't ever mention my dad along with that line o' palaver again, me bein' in earshot range, or by the jumpin' Jupiter, I'm like to kill you!"

No more was said. Jim picked up the table and chairs, righted them, and sat down. Dave went outside and sat on the stoop, moodily staring at the stars. Once Jim was on the point of bringing up the subject of the cattle which Dave had sold, but thought better of it. Tomorrow would do for that. At last he got up, undressed, and crawled into his bunk.

"Good night, Dave!" he called out. "Blow out the light afore you go to bed."

Dave merely grunted.

IT WAS LONG after midnight before Dave came into the house. Jim heard him climb into bed. For an hour or so all was quiet, and then Jim heard Dave stealthily getting up. He listened while his brother dressed. He heard the other tiptoe to the side of his bed; then move softly across the floor and gingerly climb the rickety stairs that led to the attic.

Tensely listening, he could hear Dave rummaging about among boxes and trunks stored in the loft.

At last he also got up and climbed the stairs. He met Dave at the top.

"Huntin' for sumthin', Dave?"

"If that's any of your business," Dave grunted sourly, "I was. I was huntin' for dad's two guns. I'm pullin' out—for good. Been talkin' to the sheriff lately, an' he allows he might be needin' a new deputy. If I get that job I'll need good guns, an' I don't allow," his voice rang bitterly, "that you'll ever be wantin' 'em. So I'll be troublin' you, Jim, to hand 'em over. You can take the rest o' my cows for pay, which same seems more to your likin' than guns."

"You won't get 'em, Dave, an' you know the reason why. Those guns have got blood on 'em. They fetched bad luck to dad, an' they'll fetch the same to you if I let you have 'em. Get back to bed an' catch some sleep; rid yourself o' the idee that you've got to be a killer jest because you're sprung from killer stock. The day for that kind o' thinkin' is plumb past an' gone."

"Get out'n my way, you yellow throwback!" Dave grated. "That kind o' talk makes me sick. 'Tis fit to gag me to hear you goin' on—you that ought to be proud o' bein' Peacemaker Clayton's son, even though you ain't got the guts he was born with!"

As Dave crowded past him on the narrow stairway, Jim reached out and clutched his arm.

"Listen, Dave——"

"I'm not listenin' to any more o' your kind o' talk!"

Roughly shaking himself free, he rushed downstairs. Stopping only to pull on his boots and take down his short saddle carbine from its rack, he hurried outside, slamming the door behind him.

Jim followed as far as the kitchen door. In the thin moonlight he could see Dave saddling his favorite horse. This took him only a few minutes; then he was in the saddle and loping off toward Piedras Negras.

Jim stood in the doorway until the sound of the drumming hoofs was muted, and then he shut the door. Lighting the kitchen lamp, he sat down again at the table, his lean face white and drawn, his expression like that of an aged and broken man.

Preyed upon by bitter thoughts, he sat with his shoulders hunched, arms dangling loosely at his sides, while the false dawn crept across the valley; his position was unchanged when the sun rolled like a blazing ball of molten metal above the jagged rim rock of the San Miguel Mountains.

He knew that Dave was gone for good. And it seemed to him that he, not Dave, was to blame; in his anxiety to keep the kid from following that bitter and bloody trail to a gunman's grave which old Peacemaker had marked for him, he had done the wrong thing. Too late, he saw how truly Dave was his father's son.

With hero-worshiping eyes, Dave had gloried in those deeds which Jim detested; boylike, he had basked in what he conceived to be reflected glory. He had not witnessed his

father's last fight, as Jim had, nor seen him goad a man in order to extend the reputation of his own guns; nor had his perception been keen enough to penetrate behind the veil of his father's hard, slaty eyes on those nights when Peacemaker had sat drinking, drinking to dispel the vision of a dead man's face.

To Jim alone had that vision been revealed in its rawness and starkness, and inside of him it had done something. It had made him afraid of himself. In Dave's eyes, at least, it had made him yellow. It had been his to see the vision; not his, with his halting speech and limping phrases, to convey it to the younger and weaker brother who needed to know.

He knew all too well what must inevitably happen if Dave should get that deputy's job. Sooner or later he would face a man with guns; not necessarily a desperado, but a man who would be armed, potentially a killer. Then it would be as though old Peacemaker's ghost should walk beside his son and guide his nervous hands.

Jim knew what Dave would do. He would do what his father had done a dozen times before him; wary but unafraid, cold as ice within, he would face his man and with taunting words badger him, and Dave's career would either end then and there or he would emerge a killer.

"I've got to keep it from happenin'; that's all," Jim mumbled, shaking off his lethargy.

Hastily, he built a fire, made coffee, and drank some of it scalding hot. Then he went to the corral, saddled a horse, and rode to Piedras Negras.

WHEN Jim arrived, Sheriff Dan Moberly had just reached his office. Moberly was Peacemaker Clayton's successor; an old-time officer, one of the best. He had been a deputy under Peacemaker for years, had known the Clayton boys from their swaddling days and liked them both.

"Mornin', Jim!" he greeted. "Stirrin' around kinda early, ain't you? What's on your mind?"

"Has Dave been to see you yet?"

"Nope." Moberly gazed at Jim's strained face with narrowed eyes. "Why might you be askin'?"

"Him an' me took a spell o' the outs last night," Jim explained tersely, "an' Dave, he pulled out. Said he allowed you might make him a deputy."

"Come inside," the sheriff invited, motioning toward a chair. "Dave, he did mention somethin' about wantin' a job, day or so ago, an' I promised I'd keep him a-mind."

Moberly lighted his pipe.

"Dave, he's kinda wild," he went on slowly, speaking between deep drags of smoke. "Can't say I care overmuch for some o' the company he keeps—he's been hellin' around too much with the Simp O'Day crowd for his own good—an' I figgered maybe it mightn't be a bad thing to give him a star. Pin a badge on him an' he's the same as branded with the mark o' law an' order. That what you was gettin' at?"

"It is an' it ain't," Jim replied. "To my way o' thinkin', 'twould only make a killer out'n him. He's too full of his dad's idees as it is. That's what I came down for, sheriff, to ask you not to appoint him."

"You mentioned bein' on the outs wi' him," Moberly parried shrewdly. "You shore this errand o' yourn is entirely free from spite work?"

"It's jest like I'm tellin' you," Jim replied desperately. "If'n you make him a deputy, you might's well say you've made a killer an' a bad 'un. You were a lawman along with dad;

you know how proud he was of his reputation. Well, Dave, he's bound to foller after. It's in his blood."

"Maybe you're right," Moberly returned. "I was only thinkin' o' what might happen if'n he keeps on herdin' with Simp O'Day. Because Simp, he's headin' straight for trouble—bad trouble. That's all I'm free to tell you now. If you want, I'll tell Dave I can't use him. But," the sheriff tapped his palm with the stem of his pipe by way of emphasis, "I'm warnin' you—Dave won't count no more'n any one else if'n he runs afoul o' me when the time comes to c'rell Simp an' his crowd. If'n any gun argyment comes, Dave will look jest like any other outlaw to me. That clear?"

"Plumb clear, sheriff," Jim snapped, "an' you're dead right. The only favors I want is the one I jest asked for."

Jim Clayton was entirely aware of the tragic possibilities in the bargain he had driven. Although the sheriff's reasoning was correct as far as it had gone, he knew that Dave's problem would never be solved by simply pinning a deputy's star on his breast. Bad blood and twisted ideas are not so easily eradicated as that.

What Dave would need would be a jolt that would wake him up. He would never get such a jolt by following in his father's footsteps. On the other hand, Jim had not missed the grimness in Moberly's voice when he had spoken of Dave's association with "Simp" O'Day. O'Day was a plain hoodlum, a wild, boastful product of Oklahoma imbued with the idea that he was tough enough to override the law in a community where the law was rather deeply intrenched. He was plainly riding for a fall.

If Dave should be with him when the time for that fall came, he would, as Moberly had said, look the same as any other outlaw; Moberly had not minced words about that. The worst of it was that Jim was left entirely in the dark. He knew nothing except that Dave was somehow involved with the O'Day gang, and that any attempt on his own part to pull him away would only meet with rebuff.

SOMETHING in Moberly's appraising glance threw Jim into momentary panic. He visualized Dave and Simp O'Day facing Moberly over smoking guns, and there wasn't any doubt in his mind as to what the outcome would be. If it came to that, he reflected, he would be the same as Dave's murderer. Quailing at the thought of the responsibility he had taken, he was about to speak to Moberly, to beg him to intervene somehow, when the sound of steps caused him to turn around. He found himself face to face with Dave.

Dave looked straight across the room, ignoring him completely. To Moberly he said: "I've come to talk about that deputy's job."

Moberly shook his head. "I'm right sorry, Dave, but I'm afreered I won't be able to use you."

Dave's eyes flashed. Swinging around, he thrust his face close to Jim's. Beneath his tan, the color had drained from his face. When he spoke his voice was harsh and dry as the crackle of a prairie fire:

"This is your doin', you rat! Yeh, I can see it in your eyes, an' there ain't no use denyin' it——"

"I'm not denyin' it, Dave."

Breathless with rage, Dave loosened his grip upon Jim's shirt and swung his open hand. Jim rocked on his feet under the force of the blow, and the prints of Dave's fingers showed whitely on his cheek.

The blow was no more than delivered when Dave squared off and raised his fists. Jim paid no attention to the challenge. Deathly white, he managed a faint smile; his lips trembled, and he ran his tongue over them as though they were fever-parched.

"Jim Clayton, I don't want ever to see you ag'in, nor hear your name mentioned in connection with mine," Dave said. "You've waved your white feather in public as if it was a thing fit to be proud of. The sight o' your shameless face makes me sick inside, an' I'm warnin' you, don't ever speak to me ag'in, for if'n you do, there's no tellin' what's like to happen!"

With that, he stamped out into the street. Jim watched him go. Then he turned to meet the sheriff's eyes. Moberly's face was set in a peculiar expression, as though he was greatly embarrassed. For a moment there was silence, and then Moberly spoke.

"Jim, there warn't no call to take that," he said. "It ain't right and were never intended for any man to take sech talk from anybody, brother or no brother. If'n I was you, I'd foller him acrost the street an' have me a settlement."

Jim shook his head. "I—I don't know," he returned miserably. "I don't know what to do."

"If'n you don't know after what's jest passed," Moberly said brusquely, "I reckon there ain't much use o' me handin' you any more advice."

There was cold contempt in his voice.

JIM did not leave town immediately. He dreaded going back to the empty ranch house. Wandering up and down Main Street, he passed Dave several times, without any sign of recognition on Dave's part.

These meetings intensified the gnawing misery that was choking him from within. Helpless and baffled, he felt like a whipped cur, and presently it came to him that the news of his trouble with Dave had become common knowledge. He noticed curious glances from men he had known all his life.

Stung by their unvoiced contempt he felt his face burning. At last, the thing became unbearable. Suddenly straightening his shoulders, he turned down a side street and walked toward the White Elephant Saloon. In the White Elephant he knew he would find Simp O'Day.

The usual noonday crowd of waddies and barroom hangers-on had congregated in the saloon when he pushed through the swinging doors. Most of the card tables were occupied, and a row of chairs along the wall were filled with loafers. His eyes roved about the room. His body stiffened as he glanced toward the bar where Simp O'Day and a group of his men were giving attention to a whisky bottle. To his intense relief, Dave was not among them.

Tight-lipped, he crossed the room. Deep within him the white fires of fury were leaping high. He felt a huge dislike for Simp O'Day, an instinctive thing, intensified now by dull anguish at the thought that such a man as O'Day could ever have come between himself and Dave.

His face chalk-white, he touched O'Day's elbow. O'Day was a big man, old beyond his years and flashily dressed in exaggerated Western garb. With a slithering movement, he swung around; his back to the bar, he faced Jim, his guns halfway out of their holsters, teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

Jim knew that killer's stance. That sudden coördination of hair-trigger muscles, like the quick uncoiling of a venomous snake, the snarling grin, the cold, slaty eyes, constituted a menacing warning. He sucked in his breath.

For an instant they faced each other thus. Then O'Day dropped his guns back into their holsters, shrugged contemptuously, relaxed.

"Listen, you yellow rat!" he roared, loudly enough for all in the room to hear. "You came mighty near gettin' yourself salivated that time. What's the idee? Don't you know better'n to come pussyfootin' around thataway? Ef you don't, it's about time you was learnin'."

"I know, I know," Jim gritted. "You're Simp O'Day, an' you're plenty tough accordin' to your own admission. But that's neither here nor there. I reckon we'd better go outside, Mr. O'Day, because what I want to talk to you about is—well, it's kinda personal."

O'Day leaned back against the bar. He preened himself like a gamecock. For a matter of seconds he studied Jim as if he was some strange and fascinating insect. His eyes glittered. His lips slowly twisted into an unpleasant smile. Simp O'Day possessed an instinct for showmanship, and that instinct had played no small part in the program he had used to make himself known as a hard and dangerous man.

Inwardly he was elated because Jim had approached him, although he pretended to be in a murderous rage. Already he had heard enough from Dave Clayton to convince him that he was on safe ground; he himself had done everything possible to make Dave ashamed of Jim, because Dave would make a valuable recruit in the gang he was building up.

Now he saw his opportunity to estrange the brothers further and at the same time touch Dave's pride in a way that would bring him definitely into the gang. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen Dave enter the saloon, and while he gave no sign of this, he made his play, like a skilled actor, directly at Dave.

"So you're invitin' me outside, hey? Personal matter, hey? Well, I'm willin' to accommodate ef it so happens we're talkin' the same language." He pattered his holstered guns. "Back where I come from, that kind o' palaver allus leads up to a gun dispute. That what you was a-gettin' at, by any chance?"

Jim swallowed hard. With a great effort he strove to make his words sound cool and level as he replied:

"I—I didn't come with that idee in mind——"

"Oh-ho, you didn't, huh?" O'Day interrupted. "Now 'pon my word if'n that ain't a big relief. Yep—it sure is. For a minute er so you had me plumb buffaloed, an' I don't mind admittin' it. The way you started off a-makin' talk about goin' outside to settle a personal matter, why, I figgers you cain't mean nothin' but gun talk.

"Jest what'n the hell's the big idee? What you want to see me about? Spit it out! Me, I'm jest naturally disinclined to foller you outside to hear you run off at the mouth. Don't consider it important enough."

O'DAY allowed his eyes to wander over the audience. He saw that he had made an impression; that the onlookers were hanging fast to his words. After all, in view of the reputation Peacemaker Clayton had left behind, it was no little feather in the hat of a comparative new

comer publicly to badger Peacemaker's elder son and get away with it.

He caught a glimpse of Dave Clayton's face. Dave was scowling furiously. O'Day read his expression like a page of print. Humiliated almost beyond endurance, Dave would do anything now to live up to the reputation that Jim was backing away from.

"What I wanted to say was this." Jim spoke in a voice so low and tense that hardly any besides Simp O'Day caught the drift of his words. "Keep clear away from Dave, you loud-mouthed tinhorn! I won't have him associatin' with your kind! You may make a killer out'n him—I'm not sayin' you won't—but I'm tellin' you this: If'n you do, you'll answer to me!"

Again Simp O'Day made quick and subtle use of his penchant for showmanship. He realized that very few of the lookers-on had heard Jim's low-voiced warning. Certainly none had seen the chill look in his narrowed eyes; a look which made Simp O'Day feel somehow uncomfortable in spite of himself. And so he bellowed his answer for the benefit of the crowd in general and Dave Clayton in particular:

"You're tellin' me to lay off Dave, huh? Danged ef that ain't about the richest I ever hear. They tell me Dave left home because he found you so stinkin' yellow he couldn't live with you. Supposin' I do give him a job an' a place to stay? What's it to you? O' course, maybe them rumors I hears about you are all wrong; maybe you're willin' to back up your talk. If'n you want to try conclusions with a pair o' guns, I'll accommodate you any time you like. If'n it's only wind you're spoutin', I'm too busy to bother with you."

With that, O'Day turned back to the bar and poured himself a drink.

Jim hesitated, realizing perfectly well that he was defeating the very purpose that had brought him here. He knew that the only way out, now that he had pushed matters so far, was to accept the challenge; to borrow a pair of guns and settle the matter finally and irrevocably.

But Jim knew he couldn't do it. Like a photograph, the vision of his father's last fight swam before his eyes, framed in red mist. Bitterly, he faced defeat. He had started something he couldn't finish; for the second time to-day he had shown the white feather. White-lipped and cold within, he turned away and crossed the room, walking like a blind man. Dully, he heard some one say:

"He's plumb shot through with yellow, I reckon. It's oozin' outa him like sweat, cl'ar to his neck. An' it's sumthin' I can't understand. You'd think, him bein' old Peacemaker's son, he'd r'ar up an' fight or——"

Jim wanted to yell an answer, but he was tongue-tied. His impulse was to shout to them that he wasn't yellow; that he was fighting a demon within himself that was harder to face than Simp O'Day could ever be, but he knew they would not understand. They would only laugh derisively, these neighbors and erstwhile friends who expected conduct from him based upon a code that was utterly detestable to him.

Besides, he wasn't quite sure in his own mind that they weren't right. Maybe he was yellow. Whatever it was, he knew that he was sick, physically ill, and needed air.

At the side door he came face to face with Dave. Dave's eyes were icy cold. Stiffly, he moved aside so that Jim would not brush against

him as he passed. In his expression there was disgust and utter contempt, unsoftened by any hint of sympathy or understanding. Between them, Jim realized, there had come that greatest of human barriers—the cold, unforgiving hatred of brother for brother.

A WEEK later Jim Clayton sat on the kitchen doorstep at sunset, lost in unpleasant thought. A wheat-straw cigarette hung slackly on his lip. He had let it go out. Tobacco had lost its solace for him. He was thinking of Dave, of that invisible wall that stood between them, and those unpleasant things Sheriff Moberly had hinted in connection with Dave's association with Simp O'Day.

Since their last meeting, Jim had not been to town, nor had he heard any word of Dave. To-night he had an unpleasant premonition that Dave might be in trouble. As the sun hung momentarily balanced in a cleft between far-off hills, he was debating the advisability of riding into town and trying to convince him, now that he had had time to cool off, that he should come back to the ranch.

He had vetoed this impulse when presently he saw a rider materialize out of the blue evening shadows in the valley. Jim started and studied the horseman with narrowed eyes. Could it be Dave coming home? He quickly saw it was not. Then, as the rider drew nearer, he felt his body suddenly grow cold. He recognized his visitor as Dan Moberly.

The sheriff dismounted, left his horse standing by the outer corral, and walked slowly toward the house. Jim did not get up. He was studying the sheriff closely; before Moberly was halfway across the yard Jim knew that he had neither come for a pleasant chat nor to bring good news.

"Evening, Jim!" Moberly greeted. "Had a little business out this way, an' figgered I'd stop by."

Jim knew this was not true. From Moberly's tone he understood that his greeting was only a prelude to bad news. Something in his demeanor warned that this was no casual visit. Jim braced himself and tried to make his voice sound natural as he replied.

"I reckon you've come to talk about Dave," he said slowly. "Is he in trouble? If he is, there's no call to go around the bush, sheriff. Tell me what you've got to say, an' get it over."

Moberly sat on the doorstep. He cleared his throat.

"Dave ain't in trouble—yet," he said with aggravating deliberation.

"I see," Jim said harshly; "but he's about to be—that it? He's loped across the fence an' got himself on the wrong side o' the law along with Simp O'Day. Is that what you came to tell me, sheriff?"

"Somethin' like," Moberly admitted. "Looky here, Jim, I like Dave an' I like you, spite o' some things that's happened which don't require mentionin'. Many's the time I've stood alongside your pappy in some right tough places, an' that's why I figgered to ride out an' talk wi' you to-night, Jim."

This was a long speech for Moberly to make, but as yet Jim realized, he had not got around to saying what was on his mind. Whatever it was, he was finding it hard to express, and Jim felt a rising dread.

"What has Dave done?" he asked again.

"Nothin'—yet," Moberly replied. "But I hears that Simp O'Day is plannin' to stick up the Cattleman's

Bank to-morrer noon, an' Dave's goin' to be in it with him. I've got me a good pósse all organized. If that stick-up comes off as per schedule, it's goin' to be jest too bad for Simp O'Day—an' some others.

"In this State they's a reward o' five hundred dollars for bank robbers on the hoof and a thousand for 'em dead. Most o' the boys in that posse o' mine are good shots—an' they need money. It'll be jest too bad if'n Dave should be with Simp when the shootin' begins. If'n I was you, Jim, I'd see that he wasn't there."

"D'ye think I could talk him out of it," Jim said, "after—what's happened between us?"

"Nope," Moberly replied dryly; "I don't 'spect you could."

Silence fell.

"Well," Moberly said at last, "it's gettin' late. Time for me to be driftin' along."

"Listen," Jim said sharply. "I can't let Dave get mixed up in this. Not even if I thought he wouldn't get shot, I couldn't let it happen for——"

"He'll get shot if'n he's there," Moberly put in grimly.

"Why didn't you tell him that," Jim demanded angrily, "instead of comin' to me? You know what's happened between us; you savvy full well that Dave won't take advice from me."

" 'Tain't my place to tell him," Moberly replied testily. "I'm supposed to be sheriff, not a Sunday-school teacher."

"You said yourself that you didn't think Dave would listen to me."

"He prob'ly won't."

"Then what in the name of sin d'ye advise me to do?" Jim demanded huskily. "You must've had some idee, or else you wouldn't have troubled to tell me what you have. What d'ye think I'd better do?"

"Me, I'm plumb fresh outa advice an' idees, too," Moberly replied, getting up. "Seems to me it's a pussonal matter—a purely pussonal matter."

Something in his inflection caused Jim's body to stiffen. Those softly drawled words aroused a memory bitter as gall, but they did something else. They seemed to unfetter something strong and savage within him. They knocked the shackles off his imagination. He felt the hot blood leaping through his veins. His pulse drummed heavily in his ears.

"Maybe you're right, sheriff," he said softly. "I reckon it is a personal matter. Plumb entirely personal."

AFTER Moberly had gone, Jim fashioned a brownie, lighted it, and burned it rapidly down to his lips. Having tossed the stub away, he got up and went into the house. He looked at the old-fashioned clock on the shelf above the table and saw that it was seven o'clock. Then it occurred to him that he had not eaten since breakfast. He was suddenly very hungry.

Quickly building a fire in the kitchen stove, he made coffee and fried some eggs and bacon. He ate thoughtfully but with relish, and when his meal was consumed he got up and climbed the stairs to the attic.

Five minutes later he came slowly down the stairs, carrying a pair of old-fashioned six-shooters in worn holsters — Peacemaker Clayton's guns. He laid the holsters on the table and took the guns in his hands. Carefully, he tested their weight and balance, and spun the well-oiled cylinders.

His eyes glittered with a cold hard

light and his lips were thin and bloodless as he buckled on the cartridge belt and tied the holsters low upon his thighs. As he closed and locked the kitchen door, his lips moved, and harsh words came:

"I thought I'd put 'em away forever—them guns. But maybe it wasn't right. Maybe they were a trust laid up in store for Dave—agin' the time when he would be needin' 'em."

He saddled his horse and rode to town. The streets were all but deserted, but lights glowed in the barrooms and the sounds of merriment drifting out from behind their swinging doors gave evidence that the town was not as empty as it seemed. Leaving his horse at a convenient hitch rack, he made his way to the White Elephant Saloon through an alley. He had no wish to be seen. He wanted time to think.

Reaching the side entrance of the saloon, he pushed the door open enough to permit him to look inside. The place was crowded with ranchers and cowboys, among them a sprinkling of shady characters; hard, close-lipped men who rode the dim trails on the outer fringes of the law. He had expected to see Simp O'Day—and Dave—but neither of them was present.

His heart sank. If Dan Moberly had been right in his prediction of the robbery they had planned, they might not come to-night; instead, they might be lying in some outlaw rendezvous. Should they fail to show themselves until they were ready to invade the bank, there would be nothing he could do to prevent the impending tragedy. Everything depended upon his seeing Dave to-night.

This thought was still in his mind when he heard some one coming down the alley. He saw two forms materialize and caught enough of their conversation to recognize one of them as O'Day's foreman, a Texan named "Stamp" Furness. The other one was a stranger, but likewise a Texan by his drawl.

Flattening himself in a doorway, Jim waited until they had entered the saloon; then, to avoid the appearance of following them, he went around the building and entered through the street door.

He met Stamp Furness and his companion in the middle of the room. Furness he knew by sight and reputation—a quick and deadly gunman, made more dangerous by a tinhorn's vanity. The stranger was an undersized, weasel-eyed individual with the cold, lidless eyes of a born killer. He watched this man, although when he spoke he addressed himself to Furness.

"I'm lookin' for Dave," he said. "Where is he?"

"How should I know?" Furness parried surlily. "Do I look like his nursemaid?"

"If'n I was to say what you look like to me," Jim returned softly, "you might not like it. I asked a civil question—where's Dave?"

"I see you've took to wearin' guns," Furness replied, his yellow eyes narrow. "Maybe it ain't Dave you're lookin' for. Maybe you're lookin' for trouble."

The rat-faced cowboy took a step sidewise away from Furness, leaving a yard of space between them. A sudden complete stillness had fallen over the room. Jim shifted his feet slightly, made a backward step. He saw that both were drunk and wished that he hadn't spoken to them. Furness, he saw, was merely in an argumentative mood. A fitting companion for Simp O'Day, he was a bully by nature, although he could be dangerous, too. The other

man was an unknown quantity. He had nervous hands. Jim watched those hands and took another step backward.

"The man said, was you lookin' for trouble?" this individual put in.

"If I am," Jim replied, "I'm not lookin' for it with you."

"Meanin' we ain't good enough, eh?"

"Hell!" Furness snorted. "Don't you know who he is? He's Dave Clayton's brother—you've heard about'n him. He's plumb yeller. So yeller that his own brother won't herd with him."

"You heard what the man said," the little stranger rasped evilly. "He said you was yeller."

Jim's face had gone chalk-white. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead. His lips twitched.

"Maybe—I—am—yellow. Maybe I am jest yellow enough to take talk like that from a snake like you without——"

"Look out, Jim!" some one yelled vibrantly. "That's Lance McGlone. He's pizen——"

THE WARNING came too late. McGlone's guns were already starting from their holsters. White-faced, Jim Clayton jerked his arms in a seemingly awkward movement—yet a gesture that was so lightning-quick that none who saw the thing realized he was going after his guns until it was all over.

The two old-fashioned weapons seemed fairly to leap from their worn, tied-down holsters. Their muzzles described a short arc, and then they were blazing orange flame. Lance McGlone leaped backward as though struck by an unseen hand. He fired twice; once into the sawdust floor with his left-hand gun, once into the ceiling with the other as he fell. He was dead when he hit the floor; twice dead, in a manner of speaking, for there was a bullet track through his brain, another through his heart.

Swinging a little on the balls of his feet, Jim faced Stamp Furness as Furness made his draw. The lanky Texan was a left-hand shooter, and his draw, across his body with a gun holstered high on his right hip, butt turned forward, was lightning quick. It wasn't quite quick enough. Jim's first bullet all but tore his hand in two. The other ripped through his shoulder at the base of his neck.

"You can thank your lucky stars, hombre, that I'm yellow an' not the killin' kind," Jim gritted, his voice like grinding ice. "An' now, maybe, you'll kindly tell me where I can find Simp O'Day an' my brother Dave."

"Look behind you an' you'll see 'em," the wounded man cried in a high, hysterical voice. "There they be, a-comin' through the door!"

Jim swung around to face a flood of men swarming into the saloon. Simp O'Day, his red face twisted with savage menace, was a little in advance, with Dave Clayton, scowling, at his side. Except for the two prone figures and Jim Clayton, standing white-faced in the center of the floor, the barroom seemed deserted. Boot heels could be seen sticking out from under the larger tables and from behind the bar, attesting the whereabouts of those who tenanted the place, but every chair and bench was vacant.

"Jest what'n hell's all this?" O'Day exploded. "Almighty! Somebody's salivated Lance an' Stamp!"

"I salivated 'em," Jim stated coolly.

"You? I don't believe it!"

"Suit yourself, Simp," Jim spoke in that calm, bantering tone which

had crept into old Peacemaker's voice in his deadliest moments. "You won't have long to worry about it. Because, Simp, in about ten seconds I'm a-goin' to kill you."

"You're talkin' to me? The hell you say?"

"Get out'n the way, Dave!" Jim barked savagely. "Get outside where you belong! I'll talk to you when I finish this chore."

"Like hell you will," O'Day bellowed. "He can't get out'n the way —not without gettin' his backbone blowed out! An' you're not goin' to finish your chore, because if'n you move half an inch, I'll drill you both!"

Jim saw that they were trapped.

O'Day had taken a quick step backward, making his draw as he did so. Now Jim was looking into one of O'Day's guns, while the other's muzzle was nudging Dave's back. Jim saw Dave's face blanch. Their eyes met, and in that breathless instant something passed between them. Dave's white lips parted in a nervous smile. Jim saw his body stiffen, and, reading his mind, braced himself for what was to come.

Suddenly, Dave leaped aside, and at the same instant Jim fired. A look of awful horror mantled Simp O'Day's face, and then his guns were spouting flame. Jim felt a bullet tear into his body and fired again as O'Day slumped to the floor.

As Jim's legs gave way he wondered, vaguely, why the gunmen in the doorway hadn't opened fire. Then through the red mists and drifting gun smoke he saw the reason why: He saw Dave backing toward him with the muzzles of his guns slowly weaving back and forth across the middles of that awe-struck band. Then Dan Moberly came barging in through the side door with a swarm of deputies at his heels. Jim lifted himself upon one knee as Dave reached his side. He heard Dave's voice anxiously questioning the sheriff.

"Is Jim all right, sheriff?"

"C'am yourself, Dave," Jim heard Moberly reply. "He ain't bad hurt. Why, him—— Gosh a'mighty! You're forgittin' he's Peacemaker Clayton's boy! He'll be plumb all right in no time if'n you'll jest leave him alone."

"If'n you're sure about that," Dave replied wanly. "I—I—reckon I better get outside for a minute. I think I'm goin' to be—sick."

Jim met Moberly's eyes, and a knowing grin passed between them.

Seein's Believin'!

by Edo Jan

Rebecca ran face to face with an African elephant, no less, a-tryin' to shake hands with her with his trunk.

IT'S BEEN SAID, and with some degree of truth, that seein's believin'. It's most often the exception to the rule, notwithstandin', that proves up on you. You've got to see far enough. There is, at this time, somewheres in the eastern part of this here country, a young civil engineer runnin' loose, who's, no doubt, considered the country's prize liar on account of trustin' his eyes and acceptin' their conclusions straight, with no regard for common-sense reasonin'.

I happened to put up at Cy Prentiss' ranch overnight last spring to bring back some of my critters that had wandered up thataway, about the time that a batch of them young engineers was makin' their annual traipse to Cy's to survey the school sections in Bear Canyon so as to get their degrees from college.

Cy makes quite a bit of pin

money puttin' 'em up every summer —some folks thinks he has got mixed up in polyticks to keep 'em comin' from them big Eastern universities. Anyway, this gang had bunks all over the place; I slept in the haystack myself, the house was that crowded.

Most of them boys is plenty cute with their clean, pale faces and curly hair and dude clothes, and it does beat all how comical they learn 'em to speak American in them high-falootin' schools. You just wouldn't miss seein' 'em if you knowed where to find 'em. And, I tell you, they was makin' the most of their opportunity to see what the ranch was made of, runnin' around and bellerin' like young steers in a rodeo—that is, all except one lad they called Percy.

He was just a wrong guy, I guess, for everything in the West was wrong—the house was just a shabby shack, accommodations rotten, grub fit for hog feed, the West overrated and overdone, and its inhabitants, well, they was just a bunch of nitwits, too dumb even to get interested in the educatin' of their young. A nasty scamp, that kid, with his tongue, and it sure done my old heart good to see the way he got the starch took out of him.

You see, Cy tried to make it lively up there of an evenin'. When the moon is full, that Swede of his, Monson, with the big black sideburns, comes out and sits under the pine tree and plinks his guitar while he sings in that barroom baritone, and, of course, all the boys join in the harmony.

Well, sir, this evenin' Monson just got goin' nice when Perce ups and gives him what he calls a Bronx cheer and made out like he would walk up the canyon a mite till it was over, and right at that minute every man jack among us comes right up standin'—a mountain lion cried that close you'd 'a' swore you felt his tonsils swayin' with each breath.

One of them lads asks what's that, and Cy says kind of low it's a lion.

Perce laughed sneerin'like and says: "Most any day now you'll be telling us you have a bad lot of monkeys and crocodiles about."

Monson says, smilin', "Boy, never be surprised at what you're seein' here, 'cause we got everything," and him and Cy took their rifles and went out to look for the cat.

EVERYBODY turned in kind of early that evenin', and naturally everybody was up and gone early the next mornin', except Perce, and when he reached the corral the only piece of horseflesh left for him to ride was Rebecca, which is the orneriest, snoopiest, wisest mule in Sleepy Horn County.

She sure looked interested in that tenderfoot danglin' a saddle toward her, and it must 'a' been her day off, for she not only let him saddle and bridle her and lead her to the corral fence where he mounted, but she went up the canyon trail right chipper.

When they'd gone I went over to the kitchen to chew the fat with "Shorty" a while, and I hadn't been there more'n twenty minutes when we heard the dog-gonedest clatter comin' out of the canyon, and we reached the porch just in time to see Rebecca enter the corral at top speed; her lips was stretched out forward and her tail was stickin' out of her spine as stiff as a broomstick; her eyes was twice their reg'lar size and rolled clean back; and she was screechin' ever' breath she took.

She circled the corral three times without lookin' to right or left and then suddenly stopped short, stuck her long jaws over the corral fence and looked up the canyon as if expectin' to be persued. Perce let go of the saddle horn and slipped off the wrong side of Rebecca, makin' straight for the house. He throwed all his belongin's into a suit case and strapped a loaded .38 on his hip.

In the door he turned back and says: "Tell the boss I've gone home. No explanations."

Me and Shorty give him a slab of pie and some coffee to give him strength for the hike to town, and while he was eatin' we got his story.

WHEN him and Rebecca had got up the trail to where the aspens sorta give way to the pines, they heard a terrible cracklin' on the canyon floor. The wind didn't give Rebecca a scent, and bein' naturally a snoopy critter, she took the boy through the trees to the edge of the clearin', where she ran face to face with an African elephant, no less, a-tryin' to shake hands with her with his trunk.

Well, that mule didn't lose no time in gettin' home, and the lad wasn't fer losin' none either in gettin' the first train East. He thought it was a dirty, rotten imposition to send young, inexperienced college men into a wilderness infested with the terrors of the jungles, without no warnin' whatsoever; he was an engineer, by gosh, and not a big-game hunter, and he'd not go through with this for all the damned degrees, and he'd tell the whole cockeyed world from the dean to the president immerightous.

We tried to reason with him, but facts was facts, he said, so Shorty put the rest of the pie in a bag to be et on the way, and the lad got along toward the county road.

Cy's never heard from him since, so I guess he made it all right.

When he'd disappeared down the trail, me and Shorty rode up the trail a ways where we tied our horses, and then hotfooted it down to the clearin', where we peeked around the trees. Sure enough, there was the elephant a-chawin' leaves as though he'd lived there all his natural life, and me and Shorty didn't molest him none.

ALONG toward evenin' a circus trainer and several men come by with some hooks and chains, and asked had we seen a stray elephant. There was big doin's at the ranch, as every man among us went along to see how you broke a critter like that, but that big pickaderm followed along like a calf for milk, so we felt kinda sheepish.

It seems, however, that while the circus was playin' at the coal camp over at Dead Man's Summit, some one displeased his majesty Beezlebub, and he took a hike to think it over. Cy's never heard from the elephant, neither, so I guess he made home all right, too.

Which all goes to show you, gentlemen, that you just can't take your eyes for granted always.

Well, I guess that hoss of mine has by this time et his way clean through your stable, and I got to be gettin' along home afore dark.

POP BOTTLES

MY UNCLE is a forest supervisor in charge of a National Forest in the Southwest. I spent last summer vacation with him—and with a horse and rifle of my own and a million acres of mountain and forests to wander over.

I stayed with Ranger Hardy at the Green River Station for a while, and it was there I got mixed up in the Alvin Mangus affair. Ranger Hardy says I shall never again be so near death—and live to tell about it. It was this way:

One day, in the trail, I met the old cowman they called "Gloomy."

Gloomy pulled up his horse and stopped me with a "Hey." Then he asked: "You're that Allen kid staying up with the forest ranger, ain't you?"

I don't like to be stopped with a "Hey," and I don't like to be called "that Allen kid," but there was nothing I could do about it. I knew that if old Gloomy met the King of England in the trail he'd say "Hey, you're that king feller, ain't you?"

So I said "Yes."

Old Gloomy was in no hurry. He lifted one leg over and curled it around the saddle horn, the leather chaps showing dark on the inside where they were wet with sweat. He searched out a sack of tobacco, a brown paper, and a block of sulphur matches. He drew his lungs full of smoke and let it slide out through his nose. Then he unhooked his leg, settled himself in the saddle, and, much as if it was an afterthought, he said:

"Well, when you see that Ranger Hardy, you say 'pop bottles.'"

I stared at him, then blankly repeated: "Pop bottles?"

"Yeah." Gloomy picked up his reins. "You say 'pop bottles' to him and keep on saying 'pop bottles.'" Then he kicked his horse with long-shanked, rattling spurs and started on down the trail.

"But wait!" I yelled after him. "Why 'pop bottles'? What's it all about?"

Gloomy threw back over a dejected shoulder: "I dunno."

I said "Dippy old fool" and rode on up the trail to the ranger station.

Tall, dark, and lean, Ranger Hardy rode in at sunset, threw his belt and gun on the bunk and sat down to add up columns of figures in his notebook. I was frying venison for supper and through the hissing of the meat I said "Pop bottles."

Hardy looked up, blankly, then went on with his figuring.

I waited a while and then said "Pop bottles" again and snickered, but it made no impression.

A little later I said: "I met old Gloomy down the trail. He's gone dippy."

Hardy went on with his work, answering absently: "Yeah? Old Gloomy's been dippy all his life. Dippy like a cross between an owl and a fox."

A few minutes later he shut his notebook, stood up, stretched, and yawned and asked: "What's old Gloomy got on his mind now?"

I said "Pop bottles," and Hardy opened his eyes and put his hand over his mouth as Indians do to show astonishment.

Then I explained: "Old Gloomy told me to say 'pop bottles' to you and to keep on saying 'pop bottles.'"

Hardy looked blank. "Why pop bottles?" he asked.

by W. H. B. Kent

The man was on his knees, working at something on the ground. The sun glinted on the handle of a six-shooter——

I mimicked old Gloomy to say: "I dunno."

Hardy sat on the edge of the table and fingered his chin. Then he said: "Old Gloomy is a friend of mine, and he is trying to tell me something. But I don't know what."

"Why don't you ask him?" I wanted to know.

But Hardy shook his head. "No use," he said. "These cowmen fight like cats and dogs among themselves, but they don't spill it to a forest ranger. Old Gloomy has probably said all his code permits. Well, you can say 'pop bottles' once a day."

THE ABSURD words seemed to stick in Hardy's mind, for the next morning, as he was saddling up, he said: "Old Gloomy is trying to do two things at once and making a mess of both. He's trying to tip me off to something I ought to know and at the same time not give away any of his cow-punching friends. Well, I'll know all about it some day."

As he rode away he stopped to say: "I'm getting a count on the Alvin Mangus cattle. He's got about three times as many on this range as his permit calls for. See you to-night. Adios, señor."

I washed up the dishes, then saddled up, stuck the rifle down in the scabbard under the stirrup leather, and splashed across the river on my way to the mesa, deer hunting. A narrow trail wound and twisted up the long steep slope from the river, the yellow pines scattering and stunted over the headlands and growing closer and higher in the better soil of the gulches.

I came out at last onto the high mesa where the land rolled away fairly level for miles and miles under a great forest of yellow pine. Sometimes I could look for long distances through the sun-flecked woods, and sometimes the eye was checked by clumps of stiff oak brush or little groves of young pine.

There was a smell of resin and of sun-baked pine needles, and the horse walked without noise over the springy forest floor. I left the trail and turned off west, intending to strike the upper part of Squaw Creek and then follow it back down to the river.

I rode a mile or two through the warm stillness and then, coming up out of a little hollow, a movement caught my eye, far away, down a long vista through the pines. I do not know why I stopped. Without any reason I felt a little afraid and began acting cautiously.

I waited a while, listening to my heart thump. Then I slid down from my horse and led him forward, ready to grasp his nose if he offered to nicker. I stole along from tree to tree, looking out carefully from around each group of oak brush or young pines until I was sure there was nothing in sight. Then, suddenly, I saw a man.

The man was on his knees, his back to me, working at something on the ground. He was in an open space, and the sun glinted on the handle of a six-shooter under his right elbow. Beyond him his saddle horse was waiting with dropped reins and drooping head.

After a while the man stood up, glanced up at the sun, and then down at what he had been working at, gave a satisfied nod, mounted his horse and rode away.

I WAITED a long time, hidden behind the patch of oak brush, until I was sure the man was beyond sight and hearing. Then I led my

horse over to the open space to see what the man had been up to. For a long time I studied the curious contrivance on the ground, wondering what it was for. It seemed simply childish. Then, like a flash, I understood. It was a trap all right —but not for any animal that walked those woods. I kicked it to pieces.

Then, frankly, I was scared. A man doing a thing like that would kill if he was discovered.

The woods that had seemed so warm and friendly now became a bleak and lonely place. The chattering bark of a squirrel was a frightful racket that made my heart jump. A chill wind seemed to draw down through the watching trees.

I must hurry, I told myself, hurry back to the station and tell Hardy. Hardy would see to it. I longed intolerably for the presence of Ranger Hardy. But as I crept up into the saddle I realized that by the time I found Hardy it would be too late.

I don't know how long I sat there, wanting to go back to the station. I think I would have gone, only that my horse, tired of waiting, started to walk off in the direction taken by the man. So I gathered up the reins and let him go.

It was easy to follow the tracks where the man's horse had scuffed up the dry pine needles. My eyes began to ache with the strain of watching.

I do not know how long it was before I saw the man again; just a movement, far away through the pines. I fell off my horse and grabbed his nose, in a panic lest he nicker to the other horse. I waited a while, but the horse showed no sign of interest. Then I led him carefully into a patch of oak brush and tied him there.

Carrying the cocked rifle in the crook of my elbow I slipped around the oak clump and began, with infinite caution, to make my way toward where I had seen the movement. Crouching, crawling, dodging from tree to tree, I took up the man hunt.

Miles seemed to pass, and then I was in a panic lest I had passed him, and I studied the woods behind me. I crawled into a patch of young pines, and through them, and then I saw the man.

He was on his knees again, in the sunlight of an open space, working with his hands. It seemed to me the biggest thing in the landscape was the black handle of his six-shooter. I wanted, intolerably, to crawl back into the brush.

A STRANGE, raucous voice I did not recognize as my own croaked out: "Put up your hands." I was horribly frightened as I yelled again: "Put up your hands! Put 'em up!"

Years seemed to pass, and I had time for the frightening question: "What if he don't put 'em up? What if he grabs for his gun? What'll I do then?" The man's elbows twitched and then, very slowly, his hands came up.

I was trembling as I ordered him to "Stand up!" and then: "Unbuckle your belt with your left hand and drop it!"

I think I was surprised to see him do it, and I became intensely happy. Then I told him to walk over to a log and sit down.

He walked over to the log, his hands upraised, and then turned to face me before he sat down. His eyes widened in astonishment, and then I could see disgust in his face.

He said: "Well, I'll be damned," and sat down.

I took the six-shooter out of his holster and stuck it in my belt and

wondered what to do next. I wanted to take the man back to the station and turn him over to Hardy, but didn't quite know how to go about it. I was afraid to let him get on his horse, and if I marched him, afoot, all those miles through the woods, anything might happen. Then I remembered what Hardy had told me to do if I was ever lost, or disabled, in the woods.

Keeping a watchful eye on the man on the log I began scraping up a big pile of pine needles with my foot. I touched a match to the pile, and soon there was a column of smoke shooting away up above the tops of the trees. I sat down to wait, and the man and I watched each other like cats.

It seemed a long, long time before I heard the soft rhythmic thud of a running horse, and I stood up and yelled with relief. Ranger Hardy was coming, coming on a run down through a long aisle of the forest. He pulled his horse to a plunging stop in the sunshine of the little opening and gave a swift glance at the man on the log, the dying fire, and at me.

Then the cool, hard look in his face softened, he grinned and asked amiably: "Whose party is it?"

I was so relieved and so happy I was almost blubbering. "Look!" I said. "Look at what he has been fixing," and I pointed to the contrivance the man had just finished when I stopped him.

Hardy slid off his horse and walked over, and the man on the log snarled:

"Make that fool kid keep his gun off me. It might go off."

Hardy grinned and answered: "Now wouldn't that be a shame?" and stood looking down at what the man had done.

IT DIDN'T take Hardy long to figure it out. He looked at the thing, then up at the sun, laughed gleefully, saying: "Oh, Alvin Mangus, you clever devil!" and got down on his knees to examine more closely.

He saw the thickened, convex bottom of a pop bottle—an excellent sun glass—held up on three sticks over a little pile of dry pine needles —a perfect fire trap.

Hardy laughed and nodded his head. "My, you're a clever lad, Alvin," he said. "This is old Gloomy's range, and you don't like old Gloomy, and you don't like me. So you are going to burn off Gloomy's range and burn my woods and make trouble for both of us! And you miles away when it happens."

In no time at all the sun got up to where it focused through the bottom of the pop bottle, and a little spot of white light appeared on the pile of needles. The spot turned black and then began to smoke. An instant later a bright little flame sprang up.

Hardy laughed delightedly as he put a foot on the flame. Then he carefully gathered up the pieces of the fire trap, rolled them up in his slicker and tied it on his saddle, saying pleasantly:

"We'll show it to the judge. He'll give Alvin a nice long rest—at hard labor."

Then Ranger Hardy spoke to the man on the log and his cold voice sent a shiver down my back: "We're going to town, Alvin. Get on your horse."

And all the thanks I got from Ranger Hardy was the grave-faced remark: "Don't you ever do a thing like that again. You were playing with sudden death!"

THE BAR NOTHING "TWICE TOLD TALES"

Next Month: "Youth Must Be Served."

Charlie Horse has his big chance to tell some tales of the old West as he knew it. Young blood is eager, listening!
WHEN YOU GET TO BE MY AGE YOU'LL BE GLAD TO PULL A CHUCK WAGON!
I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY YET, I'M ONLY TWO YEARS OLD!
WHY, SON, I CAN REMEMBER WAY BACK BEFORE THE DAYS OF DUDE RANCHES!
YOU CAN?
YOU'D NEVER THINK I WAS ONCE THE FASTEST HORSE IN THIS PART OF THE COUNTY!
YOU WERE?
YES, SIR, ONE DAY MY BOSS SAW A BUNCH OF RUSTLERS—
LET'S GO—I'VE HEARD THIS STORY A HUNDRED TIMES!

"G'by, friend Palgrin!" Coss chortled.

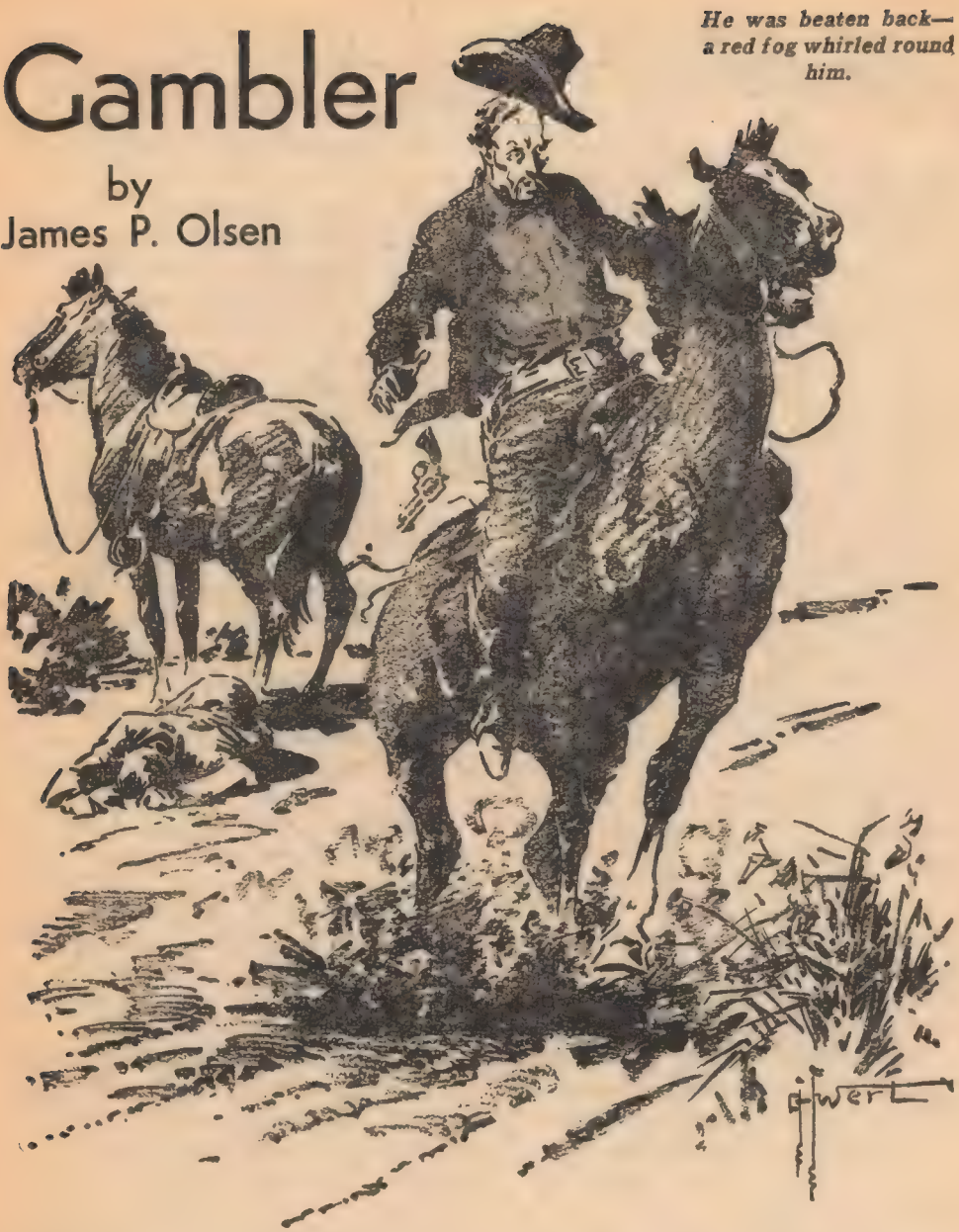
The Gun

"Chance," they called him—and he was well-named. A chance on screaming lead—a chance on crazy odds—a chance on cold bluff—he took 'em all!

LAW had come to the Pecos. No longer were the big drives pickings for the pistol men of prey. Seething under suppression, half a hundred and more hard cases went floating up the trails. "Oatman" Charlie and "Verdigris Red" were now but names; clay under twin mounds along Comanche Creek. Those grim-lipped, cold-eyed men,

Gambler

by
James P. Olsen



He was beaten back—a red fog whirled round him.

the Rangers, had swept out from Alpine, up toward the Plains, and into the Jeff Davis Mountains. Griff Nations and his band tried their hands against them. Many others flew in the face of Providence. And were no more.

Somewhere, though, the pack would forgather again. They would seek a place wherein to make one wild, last stand for hell. Up and down the Long Lane, blackjacks rustled and whispers ran out through the shortgrass and sage—Cimarron!

An uneasy movement it was at first. More vicious than self-bitten

rattlesnakes, smarting still from stung pride and licking wounds not yet healed, the Owlhooters were slow to respond. It was Palgrin who led the way. Whip-brained, Palgrin knew what was to be. He rode from a hide-out near Tascosa, crossed the Canadian River, and came eventually to that broken country and blackjack flats where Persimmon Creek flowed into the Cimarron.

There was a store there on the flats. United States marshals didn't bother here, so there was whisky aplenty to be had. Also gambling. There was a stock of clothes and guns and shells. It was gambling and shells and whisky that paid the most.

A gaunt, one-eyed hillman from the Osage country to the northeast ran the place. And the day that Palgrin pulled in, he was alone. The one-eyed man set out whisky as he studied the gaunt, wolfish figure of the gambler. The lines of Palgrin's hard face all tended downward. He was cold. A gambling man of infamous repute, it was declared none of his fraternity could best him with a gun; few at cards; and these few dared not because of his gunmanship.

"I want some things. Write down the list I give you," Palgrin ordered.

The hillman shook his shaggy head. "Ain't ary man in all my kinfolk thut ever could make writin'. All I kin make is my mark——"

"Make marks on the floor, then!" Palgrin snarled.

A stingy Bisley model gun appeared magically in his right hand. The sneering snout of it was puffing fire and rings of smoke to punctuate Palgrin's words. The hillman rocked over his board counter, then back. In ecstasy of blood-letting, Palgrin emptied the gun.

His only regret was that he could not have taken time to force the exowner of the place to dig his own grave. Yet the grave out in the blackjacks that Palgrin managed served very well indeed. So did the bill of sale Palgrin drew up. He signed it with the mark of X, and who was to question the deal?

There was paint in the place. A twisted grin on his face, Palgrin painted himself a sign: Hellhaven. He nailed it on a hickory tree by the trail that led riverward. And over the door of his lead-bought place went another. It was now The Jackoak. Thus Hellhaven was begun.

HELLHAVEN, then, became the last stand for that lurid legion fogging up from down below. Shacks now were scattered through the blackjacks. Another saloon came in and an eating house. Palgrin moved the clothes and guns and shells into another building and the Jackoak became saloon and gambling house alone.

Turbulent, wild days and nights they spent there in that place they built up as their own. Pistoleers and bad men whose infamy had spread from Calgary to Baja, Mexico; crooked gamblers and low-down, common thieves; breeds and rotters of every killing creed.

Trigger itch jerked their fingers. They fairly ached with the curiosity of their kind—the desire of each to test his skill, his name and fame against others equally as famously infamous. On a knoll in a scraggly grove of persimmon trees, Boot Hill was laid—persimmon trees that shed more bitter fruit upon the acrid crop these gunmen had harvested from life; ironic, stark as Hellhaven and its denizens themselves.

In the lazy, hazy autumn afternoon, a big, trail-dirty man rode past those graves. He yawned, settled

his gun and rode on. He dismounted and strode into the Jackoak, had a drink and looked around. Palgrin, reading sign, indicated a chair at the table where he and two bank robbers from the Kansas Flint Hills were playing a pastime game of draw. The newcomer sat in.

Ten minutes later, another stranger aired his saddle and came inside. He, too, was trail-dirty and brush-scratched. A quick look passed between them. The second man stepped back to the bar and lounged idly there.

Palgrin looked up. "Seems to be a day for visitors," he observed.

If he knew the three now coming in together he gave no outward sign. They pulled up at the bar. One or two iron-jawed outlaws walked quietly out of the rear door.

Thick-lipped, a bristling mustache drooping on his flatulent face, the apparent leader of this trio scowled when one of the others called him "Essen" in low voice. The other hushed.

And now, smiling without mirth, Palgrin was pushing back his chair. He chuckled, stretched, and said to the big newcomer at the table:

"Come outside a minute. I want to talk to you."

He turned and walked to the foot-high porch in front. The other, frowning, arose and followed. The man at the bar made a move to follow. Somehow, unconsciously, the man called Essen moved up to block the path.

On the porch, Palgrin had turned. Without warning, he grabbed the gun arm of the man he'd called outside. Loud-voiced, he cried:

"You were cheating, you coyote! Grab your gun!"

He had his own gun half drawn before the other could wrench away. A roll of shots, and Palgrin was still grinning in enjoyable manner as he emptied his gun.

Echoes of his own pistol had not ceased to throb when a burst of gunshots roared inside the place. The man who'd followed the dead man in had gone for his gun. Essen fell away, his weapon speaking of death. The pair with him had split. From three compass points jarring lead jerked the life from the second trail-dirty rider.

The mustached man strode jerkily onto the porch. He tapped Palgrin on the shoulder. Palgrin continued fishing in the chaps pocket of the man he'd laughingly killed. He arose only when he had extracted a sack of gold pieces from that pocket.

"Well?" He faced the other.

"I'm Essen. Case you don't know. I'm sort of a deputy marshal in these parts. Those gun-throwers in there are my cowhands and my deputies. I run a ranch some ways from here. A couple of weeks ago, this"—he prodded the dead man with his toe—"and that one inside, ran off some of my cattle. That's my money, then." He held out his hand.

"Essen. I've heard of you," Palgrin said, holding onto the gold.

His manner of speech implied that he had also heard that this deputy marshal's spread had been built quickly by raiding trail herds passing through to the East. And other things offshade had contributed, too.

"I've heard of your deputies, Leroy and Doxie, also," Palgrin went on. "And the little trick of mix-up cross fire you all three employ to down one man."

"It works," Essen grunted.

"Not on me," Palgrin returned. "But I'll tell you what: If you want to play marbles, I'll play. If you don't——" He shrugged,

whistled tonelessly through his teeth, and looked toward the persimmon trees on Boot Hill.

Essen recognized how it stood. Palgrin did, too. It would be better they did not tangle. Better by far to let the stand-off stick.

"Marbles," the deputy marshal-rancher curtly decided.

Palgrin bowed and placed the sack of gold coin in Essen's open palm.

"Is the man badly hurt?"

THEY both spun. Both gambler and marshal sucked in gasping breaths. Unnoticed because of the drama just enacted, a light wagon with canvas schooner cover had bobbed over the rise south of Hellhaven and stopped by the porch.

Repeating his question, a white-haired old man was fumbling under the wagon seat. In the manner of the weary and the aged, he crawled down, using wheel spokes as a ladder to the ground. He carried the black bag of a physician in one hand.

"I'm a doctor," the old man explained as he knelt beside the man who'd never need a doctor any more.

Palgrin and Essen did not care. They barely heard. They were staring toward the wagon and the vision on the seat.

Palgrin, the quicker to act, stepped out, bowed and said: "Welcome, miss. As the leading citizen of the town, I give you the keys."

Essen shouldered up to him, jerked off his hat and made certain his tarnished badge was not concealed by his dusty vest. "As the law in these parts, lady, I'm saying I'm glad to be at your service any time."

"The law?" Palgrin softly inquired.

They glared hate at each other; then faced back to the girl on the seat. Men had jammed the doors and windows of the Jackoak.

The girl drew back into the seat.

"This man is dead." Quietly the old man intruded on the scene.

"Sure, old doctor," Palgrin impatiently agreed. "When I shoot them they usually are dead."

"Old Doctor" he had called the old man with the kindly Lincolnesque face and wispy white hair. An old man with sad eyes and veins in his face that were like lines of a book to the owner of the Jackoak. Those veins read—liquor.

"This is my daughter, Mary," Old Doctor said. He looked longingly inside the saloon and informed Palgrin: "I was looking for a new place in which to follow my practice. I heard of this town. But it doesn't seem to offer much——"

Palgrin grabbed his arm. "Offer much? Old Doctor, you'll get rich here. Why, I'll send you lots of trade."

He laughed at his own macabre joke. Then scowled darkly when Essen put in:

"I'll figger to help that way. I'll see that you have a house built right away. Fact is"—his look at Palgrin a taunt—"I'm building an office over here myself."

"We'll have a drink to celebrate your coming."

Palgrin took Old Doctor's arm. The old man's lips quivered. Eagerly he started for the door.

"Please!"

The girl, Mary, was holding out one hand. Old Doctor seemed not to have heard. Palgrin grinned to himself and ushered him inside.

A girl, a young woman, in Hellhaven! Full-limbed in the flush of early womanhood; inviting with youth and sweet face. A pitiful shell of an old man, quivering

eagerly at the very name of drink and——

The persimmon trees on Boot Hill shivered their leaves and stood to drop more bitter fruit upon new graves to come below.

II.

"WHICH trail to Hellhaven?"

The breed outlaw's thick lips quirked contemptuously at the man who put the question. He arose from the camp fire deep in a hidden ravine and grunted: "I don't see how you got this far. But I'm tellin' you, Hellhaven ain't no place for buttons which ain't yit dry ahind the ears."

"So?"

"Coss" Chance unwound like a smoothly coiled spring. He faced the breed across the fire. His slender body bent toward the other and the jerky smile caused his snubby nose to wrinkle. He was pink-faced and blue-eyed and appeared just as innocent as they ever came to be. A whimsical expression, and a whimsical soft and drawling voice. All of these things, outward signs and appearances, were so damned deceiving!

"When I ask a question politelike, I aim to have 'er told back likewise," Coss Chance softly informed the breed. "I'm askin' you once more: Which trail to Hellhaven? No? Oh—hell!"

Almost wearily he made the exclamation. And then there was a swirl of arms and legs, and out of the wild jumble resolved Chance, sitting astraddle of the bigger man, hooking his rowels into his ribs and scratching him back and front. There came a roar of laughter from the half dozen other men about the fire.

Chance, looking over and grinning from ear to ear, acknowledged the acclaim. He turned his attention once more to the man swearing and yelling as the spurs bit deep.

"I said, which way to——"

"The south trail till you hits the river!" the breed yapped.

Chance nodded gravely and got off the other's back. Spitting cattishly, the breed wheeled to his feet. Gravely, placidly, Coss Chance shook his head.

"Nuh-uh," he softly cautioned. The heavy .44 that had dangled at his hip now pointed *too* carelessly at the other's stomach.

A murmur of admiration. A chuckle for the discomfiture of the breed. The man himself, then, grinned slowly and took his hand from the butt of his gun. Chance smiled back, yet for all his evident good nature, his blue eyes contained warning light. Politely, then, he was given his directions and rode away from there.

Rode in the manner of a man who owns the world. Whistling, smiling along, apparently a cowboy on the loose. Cowboy; yes. But an ex-cowprod was Coss Chance. And although he no longer rode the range —at least not after cows for thirty and found—his were still the happy, carefree, and open-handed manners of a big-hearted tribe even now fading rapidly into the limbo of the lost. His blood was hot, and he craved to see the mountains' other side and to seek forever more excitement there.

Toward mid-afternoon, Chance rode over the rise and passed Boot Hill. He tilted back the flat-crowned, dusty black hat he wore, built himself a cigarette and fished in the pocket of his calfskin vest for a match.

"One," he counted mounds. "One—two—five—six. Well!"

That his was a nature of understanding was evinced by the quirk of his lips as he sat there smoking, watching persimmons plop onto those heaps.

"Not yet frosted fit to eat," he reflected. "Puckery an' bitter as all get-out. Bullets make puckery scars in green hides, an' the slug 'at stops you is the bitter one."

He, apparently, found grim humor in the layout. "Knave's Knoll," he said aloud. "Some day, reckon I'll hold down a spot myse'f. But I guess the time ain't now."

Of course, Coss Chance hadn't been introduced to Hellhaven gentry yet. But he would be, mighty soon.

He rode lazily on down and left his horse before the Jackoak. Turned, then, and stared bug-eyed and with his mouth an open invitation to the entire colony of gnats. A girl had stepped upon the low porch of the Jackoak, hesitated timidly, and then gone inside.

"Now," declared Chance very solemnly indeed, "I know I'm thirsty." He gave a quick tug at the fuzzy mess of hairs on his upper lip and marched inside.

His spurs jingled musically along the scarred and lead-gouged floor. His hat cocked at a jaunty angle, he headed toward the girl. He stopped, then, and looked and also listened. The girl was pressing earnest entreaty upon an old white-haired man who sat slumped in a chair in the rear. She tugged at his shoulder. The old man flopped like a rag doll and gave no response.

Red color mounted Chance's face. He divined the hoarse breathing, the hot eyes, the tense attitudes the men in the place showed. He was ashamed of himself for having somehow had, in lighter vein, the same idea. He heard the girl call the old man "dad," and heard her say "Mr. Palgrin" to the cold-faced man who came strutting up.

She was afraid of Palgrin. Chance could see that with one eye. It occurred to him he could. So he closed one eye. Yep. That was right. He heard Palgrin protesting:

"But I didn't get him drunk—uh—Mary."

The girl winced at such familiarity.

"But I'll take care of him, sober him and bring him home. You run along. I'll bring him down to you."

"An' yourse'f with 'im. Uh-huh! I betcha," Chance said to himself.

He stepped back as the girl came toward the door. For just an instant the girl's eyes met his. There was appeal, fright, misery, in that glance of hers. She seemed to have hope as she noted the clean, boyish cut of Chance's face. And then she saw his gun, the glint of his own blue eyes; held her skirts and passed on.

A bottle-bodied big man slipped unnoticed out of the back door, unnoticed by all save Coss Chance. And Chance, still not having impressed his own personality upon the assemblage here, strolled outside again.

THE GIRL was hurrying down the street, looking neither to right nor left. It angered Chance that he could not forget the misery he'd glimpsed in her eyes; the quivery, brave set of her lips. He leaned lazily against the post at one end of the porch and then straightened with no show of laziness at all. The bottle-shaped buzzard had stepped from between two shacks down the road and had fallen in step beside the frightened girl.

It happened very quickly. Chance saw a mustached, heavy man come out of a shack across the road. On

the shack was a crude sign that informed the world and sundry that Essen, deputy marshal, was now holed up down here. Which same he was. Essen, while held back from Mary, was also holding Palgrin at arm's length. His trips to his ranch were fast now and growing infrequent.

"Let the law do the job?" Chance whimsically remarked to himself. "Huh! Hey, you im'tation of a quart uh Cherokee hooch!"

The big man whirled. Mary walked a few rapid steps, turned. She gasped, started to go on, and seemed unable to make her feet obey.

"You—buttin' in. You know who I am, button? I'm Meech! An' if I wanta walk this gal home, I walk her. Sabe?"

"Meech?" Chance scratched his head reflectively. "I heard tell of a Meech who hatched out on a stump one time, after the buzzards had flied themse'fs away. I didn't believe 'at yarn, though, till jest now. You ask him to stroll along, miss?"

Speechless, Mary could only shake her head.

Chance sadly allowed: "I reckon you better make sort of apology."

Meech exploded. The buzzard business had soaked in, and now this pink-faced puncher was telling him, Meech, to apol——

"You!" Meech bellowed. He grabbed for the gun at his thigh.

There followed in rapid succession the spanking report of Chance's gun. Meek, numb of arm and minus a finger, his gun flying out of his hand, screamed insane rage. And then he caught hell.

Chance's gun barrel cracked his head this way; his fist knocked it back the other. Meech bellowed and swayed back, and Chance very thoughtfully kicked him in the belly to bend him his way once more. Meech went to his hands and knees, and, like an irate bantam rooster, Chance leaped to rearward and kicked him where he sat. Meech went flat; got to his hands and knees again and was kicked flat once more.

"Get your errant tail high ag'in, man!" Chance whooped. "H'ist 'er, ol' son, so I can tromp 'er down some more. Bawl an' beller an' paw the ground. Whup! Stick 'er high —'at's fine."

A heavy hand fell upon Chance's shoulder. He ducked, fell away and came up. He held the slam of his gun as much as he could; twisted his wrist, and the front sight raked Essen's face from hair line to chin. They stood off then, guns trained at respective belt buckles. And as he glowered at Coss Chance, Essen knew full well he was facing a dangerous man. Yet not, he somehow conceived, a man who could beat him at this game.

And then there was Palgrin striding up, glowering. Meech crawled away. Fled the wrath of Palgrin and Essen and the ire of the newcomer who jeered as he fought.

"Put up your gun. You can't assault an officer here," Essen raved.

"Put up your own cutter," Chance curtly came back. "You ain't in no position to tell *me* what to do. Besides, I think your face needs wroppin' up in salve."

"He was protecting me."

Mary, white-faced, stepped between them. And Palgrin, glaring at both Essen and Chance, reached out and grasped the girl's arm.

"I'll take you home," he said.

Chance raised brows at Mary. A dimple showing in one cheek, she quickly inclined her head. He swept off his hat, bowed low to Essen and then to Palgrin and took the girl's arm.

For the space of many heartbeats, Chance and Palgrin stared into each other's eyes. All the hate in creation was lined on Palgrin's face. And the features of Chance went harsh and cold. Chance and Essen; Essen and Palgrin: enemies by circumstance and choice and covetous of the same beguiling prize.

But Coss Chance and Palgrin were born enemies; opposites, slated to hate each other from the day their long-gone ancestors were first conceived.

Palgrin, then, stepped back. "I'll see you—later," he warned.

"You'll answer some things to me," Essen gruffly promised.

And so, while they hated each other, they were drawn together by a common hate for Coss Chance. And Chance, holding Mary's arm, had the temerity to look back over his shoulder and grin at them as he took their prize to her home.

III.

SULLENLY Essen and Palgrin waited while Coss Chance stepped up to the bar, tossed off a drink and accompanied it with a wry grimace of open distaste that bespoke little compliment to Palgrin's brand of selling liquor. He built a smoke, rubbed an itching nose, and made Essen repeat his wigwagged summons to come over.

"I'm warning you," Palgrin began as soon as Chance pushed back a chair and sat down.

Chance scowled. Like a downward swope of sun-shaft through a rifted cloud, his hand fell to his gun. And so did Palgrin's. Almost hopefully, Essen looked on and made no interfering move.

Hands to butts of guns, but neither drew. It could have—probably would have, been suicide. As they searched each other's faces, each read a story there.

Chance saw probable Nemesis in Palgrin, and Palgrin savored the same in Chance. Although this was his idea, Chance felt he could, when and if the time came, melt Palgrin down. Palgrin obtained the same thought and slowly came to look upon Chance as an inferior in brains as well as ability. But not too inferior in ability.

Wait. Perhaps a way would evolve wherein Chance and Essen could be pitted to Palgrin's benefit. And Essen, seeing this was a standoff, put in:

"Sit down, and let me do the warning," he snapped.

Both men sat down.

"Who're you? And why come here?" Essen demanded.

"Coss Chance. Here because it plumb suits me to be."

"So?" Essen drummed finger tips on the table top, looked to the bar to be assured his faithful bodyguards, Leroy and Doxie, were posted, and got on with it.

"Killer, eh?" he sneered. "Bad outlaw?"

"No killer," Chance denied.

Which was the truth. Purely his own misfortune that he had been born bad medicine, quick on the draw, swift on the shoot, and with reflexes that enabled him to jump a man and knock him bawling before the other knew the game had begun.

"Fast-draw artist with a long nose," Essen pressed.

"Well"—Chance was plainly unperturbed—"faster than five—or was it six?—bad hombres 'at has tried my hand till now. I ain't got no hankerin' to kill. Yet damn if I'll stand hitched while some other skunk kills me! Outlaw? Well,

now, I reckon I ain't never built up no ranch on the take I've made."

He grinned at Essen, and Palgrin was constrained to hooraw out loud.

Surprising, that Essen should chuckle at this? Well, Essen himself was not so stupid. Here was a man who hated Palgrin. So let him alone a while. Maybe something would come of it. So Essen shrugged, pushed back and up and stalked out without uttering another word. Leroy and Doxie went rambling at his back.

Tension released. Card games went on. Glasses clinked once more. There was, too, a brooding air of disappointment in the place. For most, to look at Chance, to hear him once, was to like him. To know Palgrin was to despise him and fear him. Even these hard customers feared him, and they'd had hopes.

Palgrin waved, and his private bottle was brought. He poured drinks—never wavering his gaze from Chance—and held his glass at a level with his chin.

"To danger—damn you!" he mirthfully yet hatefully proposed.

So they held in abeyance the feud men swore must come. And Chance, responding to that singular offer, held up his own glass, eyed Palgrin over the edge of it and laughed. Introspection divulged that each found something delicious, worth while in this shadowing sense of acute danger. And as they tilted their glasses, they seemed to enjoy a murderous, macabre type of fun. Each knew; they faced stark and sudden death when they faced each other so.

Chance went so far as to make a gruesome joke: "Persimmons, on Knave's Knoll, will soon be touched by frost. They'll fall——"

"But not on me," Palgrin put in, arising.

Who would survive? Bets would be placed on the outcome, with the odds favoring Palgrin to overheel this bland-faced boy who was no boy at all. Yes, Hellhaven collectively decided, the game would be worth watching, after all.

CHANCE turned to a poker game, brought over a bottle and pulled himself a chair. He nodded to the others around the baize, recognized a pair of them. One was dogged from Market Square in Kansas City to the lowest border toward old Mexico. It wasn't healthy doing to hold up trains, yet this gent appeared to hold his health intact. The other man was red-faced and beefy, and they naturally called him "Butch."

Chance considered Butch Kelso in the same light as he did gilas, tarantulas, and the type of men who lived off women in the honky-tonks. He did not deign to speak to or notice Butch, but it was apparent from the beginning that he was out to grab Butch's pile.

Toward midnight he did. And in another hour, while the others at this table sat back and looked interestedly on, he took Butch over the barrel for the only thing the red-faced man had left that he dared part with—his dinky little shack at the edge of town.

"I'm movin' in pronto," Chance allowed.

He arose, yawned, and from behind his hand came a muffled invitation to come to a house warming right soon.

"You don't move in until I move my stuff!" Butch swore. "An' I don't move it until I feel like doin' so." His glaring eyes defied Chance.

Chance cocked his brows quizzically. "No?" he inquired solici-

tously. "We'll see, big fella; we'll see."

A small group followed Chance from the Jackoak and down the dark road. He shot the lock off the shack that was now his, and, while his appreciative audience stood by, began chucking out the worldly goods and chattels of Mr. Kelso.

"I bet this union suit breaks when it hits the ground," he loudly observed. "It's 'at stiff with dirt. An' here is a can of talcum powder what smells—mmmm-mmmm! An'—phooey! A pair of boots with something 'at musta crawled inside 'em to die." He laughed along with the uproarious bunch outside.

"Them boots—look out, for here they come!" he yelled.

Perhaps it was an accident. Again, possibly it wasn't. Whichever it was, the maligned boots shot out of the door, and the heel of one caught Butch Kelso in the eye. He groaned and staggered back, and then looked through stars at the full moon of Coss Chance's Cheshire-cat-featured face.

Butch hesitated. He was warned by the metallic quality that undercut the tone of levity in Chance's voice: "There's your stuff, you mouthy microbe. Go off an' find yourse'f a empty polecat's den to set up housekeepin' in."

He waited, tensed, in the doorway, hoping Butch would draw. Butch wouldn't. Chance knew he wouldn't. Butch Kelso shot from ambush. Killed for petty pay in two-bit cattle wars, or stole from poor Indians and others of that ilk. He was a murderer, and while Coss Chance was none too burdened with whitewash on his own, he knew Butch Kelso to be a black mark against "honest outlaw trade."

Butch mumbled, picked up his truck and moved off without saying a word. Truly a dangerous sign. The group outside went back toward the Jackoak, and Chance sat himself down to attempt gaining a sense of possession in his new home. He was restless beyond constraint, got up, got his horse and war bag, put them up, and still could not sit still or get to bed.

He went out and sat on the ground, his back against the shack, and looked toward Old Doctor's darkened place. Whimsically he observed half aloud that a man would be sort of lucky to collect one-two little bullets if Mary was going to nurse him back to health. It did not occur to Chance that he had put himself well in the way of getting so much lead drilled into him that nursing would never do him any good. The knowledge that such could be was far back in his mind, all right, but unheeded now.

Up the road, a gun spoke, full-throated in the morning quiet. Another report, sharp and sudden, and then quiet once more. Chance slowly shook his head. Up on Boot Hill—or, to Chance, Knave's Knoll—whippoorwills were softly chanting their blue complaint. Likely, when they hopped about in the trees, they shook persimmons loose to fall on graves below.

Those guns up the street, now—likely there'd be one-two more persimmon catchers planted up there. And they wouldn't be the last. Chance smoked and looked toward Old Doctor's and wondered if such would be his lot. Cussed feelingly, then, and got up and went inside.

"Women like Mary is worse than loco weed," he heatedly remarked.

He flopped into his bunk and, just before he fell asleep, reflected aloud: "I've shorely had an interestin' day!"

IV.

CHANCE awoke to a day of lowering clouds. A chill, brisk wind whipped across the blackjacks, setting brittle, dry leaves to clacking, wrenching showers of autumn-tinted foliage from the hickory trees, and shrieking ghostly promises in canyons and ravines.

He had his morning cup of black coffee and his cigarette and went to stand in the doorway. Restlessness prevailed within him. Cloudy days did that to him; imbued in him a nervous nostalgia that made him want to drive on, forever onward. Yet he had small desire to quit Hellhaven. He reacted gloriously to the omnipresence of danger here and was held by thoughts of a girl who needed help. Too, Coss Chance had an errand to be done in these parts; an errand that demanded he ride out not many hours hence.

A group of men were making holiday this morning. Most of them hadn't been to bed. They were straggling, for the most part drunkenly, up on Knave's Knoll, where others had just completed digging one big grave. Chance watched one of the diggers reach up, pluck a persimmon and bite into it. His face puckered and he attempted to whistle while the rest guffawed.

"Bitter medicine," Chance cryptically observed.

The two groups marching toward the knoll set down their burdens. One bunch toted a canvas-wrapped, six-foot parcel. The others grunted under the weight of a square packing box. One of them had been in the hilarious group that had watched the dispossession of Butch Kelso early that morning. He waved at Chance, and called:

"Peckerwood Peters an' Flintridge Yates augered 'er out in the wee 'n' small hours, an' it ended in a *dead* heat. We drawed straws to see who'd bury which. We done best by Peckerwood. Got him a box for a coffin."

"Yah!" one of the other party jeered. "But you hadda double him up face to knees to get 'im in it. He'll be kotowin' to the devil when he lands in hell!"

They resumed their journey. Watching, Chance was struck by the grim humor of the thing. Bragging because they'd found a box in which to bury the corpse they'd "drawn;" being hoorawed because they had to "fold him up." And up there on the knoll, both box and canvas parcel were dumped into the one big hole. They'd taken each other from life, those two. But in death, which makes enemies as one, they were buried together.

An argument followed, after the grave was filled. They seriously, then heatedly, debated whether they should make one mound or two on top. The "two mounders" won the issue and the top dirt was divided into two mounds. Wrangling good-naturedly they came back down the hill. Likely, before another day was done, some of this same good-natured yet grim-jawed group would send another of the same back to the knoll for keeps.

A bluejay hopped about in the trees and cockily eyed the fresh dirt. The wind shook more unripe persimmons down.

In passing, some one called again to Chance: "Musta bruk Butch's heart when ye tuk his castle. He done rid out this mornin' to'ard the Kansas line."

Chance started. Had Butch Kelso gone early on the same mission that he intended taking up later to-day

or to-night? If he had, it was going to be too damn bad for Butch.

AS HE walked up the road toward the Jackoak, Chance saw Essen, Leroy, and Doxie riding out of Hellhaven. They crossed Persimmon Creek and took a direct route through the blackjacks, heading toward the Cimarron and Kansas. Chance frowned, paused, walked on. Palgrin's two-room shack, sitting alone in a patch of post oak, seemed deserted. When Chance reached the saloon, he learned why.

Palgrin already was up and abroad, and starting, this early in the day—early for Hellhaven—to get Old Doctor soused again. The old man was bleary-eyed and trembling, his face splotched and purple-veined.

"Hair of the dog," Palgrin said, shoving bottle and big glass at him.

Trembling and eager, Old Doctor downed a big shot.

"No more to-day," Old Doctor quavered. "I can't do it."

But just the same he took drink after drink that Palgrin pressed upon him. Chance wanted to stop it. Palgrin's game of laying into an old man's weakness in order to make a play at Mary was almost more than Chance could stomach. Still and all, Old Doctor was past voting age, and it was not, exactly, Chance's put-in. He had an idea the old man would straighten up if given half a chance. Palgrin would give him no chance at all.

Chance had a drink, stared bleakly at Palgrin, and received the same in return. He went out and into the so-called eating house, ate, and came back to the Jackoak. Hellhaven seemed pretty well deserted right now. Either her citizens had ridden off to collect bounty outside the law, or were sleeping soundly in the blackjacks or in their bunks.

Palgrin, before Chance reached the place, came out with Old Doctor. He was practically carrying the old man. He was taking him home. Old Doctor, passed out! Hellhaven almost deserted this time of mid-afternoon. And Mary down there alone.

Chance waited until Palgrin got Old Doctor inside the three-room shack down the road, then walked that way. He settled his gun conveniently to hand, then stepped up and rapped on the door. It was jerked open almost immediately. Mary, her face flooded with relief, stepped back.

"Come in, please," she imploringly invited.

Palgrin, the feverish light in his eyes now glinting to a glow of rage, snarled at Chance.

Mary turned to Palgrin. "Thank you for bringing my father home, Mr. Palgrin. Good-by."

She stepped aside so he could walk a chalk line to the open door.

Palgrin, maddened, chagrined, crammed his hat on his head. He paused in the door to snap back at Chance:

"You're pressing your luck and my tolerance too far. Watch yourself. The joke is coming to an end."

He slammed the door. And it somehow seemed the most natural thing in the world that Mary should be crying on Chance's shoulder, with his arms about her waist.

"He meant harm," she sobbed. "He means to wreck what little will dad has left. Dad's different since mother died. And when he does that——" She shuddered.

Chance patted her. He bent to kiss the crown of her head and then drew back. Mary seemed to realize

then. She blushed, but made no effort to draw out of his embrace.

"You've helped me two times while you endangered yourself," she murmured. She held inviting lips up to him.

Chance didn't hesitate. He crushed her to him, held her a long moment, then stepped hastily away. "You forget I'm an outlaw, too," he said bitterly.

"You could change. You aren't really bad, Coss Chance."

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested, changing the subject.

They strolled out and into the bottoms along the creek. A flock of crows cawed lonesomely. The girl drew close to him.

"We dare not try to leave," she said. "The pack of them would be on us as soon as we left where Palgrin and Essen held them away. Yet it will be just as bad if we stay."

Chance nodded. He knew this was so. Not because the Hellhaven outlaws would go so far as to stop them; but because Essen and Palgrin would put their hounds upon them if they tried to flee. Send men after them, which would be worse, even, than what Mary might meet here. And Old Doctor, whisky-sodden as he was, would not even try to leave. Palgrin was wise to that; and to the fact that Mary would not leave her father.

"Ain't they nobody, no sweetheart nowhere?" Chance asked.

She hung her head. "There was, once," she said, low. "A young doctor in Nebraska. But—but I've forgotten him—now."

She looked up at Chance. Tears hung unshed on her long lashes. An autumn leaf had fallen and clung to her dark hair and the wind had brought more color to her tired young face. Chance's arms ached. He was no saint, and this girl believed she loved him. She was carried away by the temporary relief from danger that Coss Chance afforded.

He groaned under his breath and brusquely said: "Come on."

They turned back toward the camp. She offered her lips once more as he left her. He fought himself, brushed them lightly with his own, and struck off down the road.

Elbows on knees, hands dangling between his legs, he sat in his shack and stared at the toes of his boots.

"There was a young doctor," he mumbled to himself. "Then there is still a young doctor. Girls like Mary don't forget. She thinks she likes me lots, when it's jest appreciation. Mebbe I'm bad. But not 'at bad."

He thought of how much he'd like to go somewhere and start a little cow spread of his own. With a girl like Mary to ramrod the ramrod of the beef shebang. He'd like it, yes; but did not try to fool or lie to himself. Coss Chance knew full well that his trails were the long and lonely lanes—thunder of guns. Above all, the teasing of danger when you stood a chance to lose! Chance—the name fitted him as no other could.

Darkness quickly flung a sable mantle over the dove-gray light of the day. Toward nine o'clock, Chance went out to the lean-to stable and tossed the rig on his horse. He put a bottle in his coat pocket, filled his belt with .44 cartridges, and stuck a saddle gun—an old worked-over Spencer—into the boot under his left knee.

He knew, as he rode into that wild night, that this, after all, was his life. For a time he forgot Mary, forgot everything save the wild tingle in his blood as he took the road agent's trail.

V.

IN THE bleak grayness of a soggy daybreak, a slickered, masked man crept toward the stage-and-express station in a little town across the Kansas line. And not many minutes later, the clerk, roused from his bunk in the back of the place, was wide and fearfully awake, shivering as he got into his pants.

"The safe, open 'er, fella—an' stop 'at damn shakin'. I'll buy the drinks without you shakin' me for 'em."

The voice came muffled behind the neckscarf hiding the holdup's face. And the tone of it was not dangerous, but rather assuring that no harm could possibly come to that clerk. Too, further assurance came by way of the amused twinkle in the blue eyes above the neckscarf.

The clerk went into the front and knelt in the gloom behind the counter. The safe clicked and he opened the door, then swung on his heel and launched himself at the masked, rather slight man.

The gun in the holdup's right fist swung downward—a regretful blow, and not a hard one. The clerk bored in. "You loco—ranny? Hate to—do it!"

The gun barrel descended once more. The clerk pawed at his head, rocked back, and went down on his face.

"Hated to do 'er, ol' hoss," Coss Chance apologized.

He stepped across the prone man and knelt before the safe. He squinted at the addresses on packages; cast aside some that he knew must have contained money, then grunted his satisfaction as he yanked out a heavy leather sack.

"Texas an' Indian Nations Cattle Syndicate," he read, his voice making a curse of the words. With his knife he slit the pouch below the locked top. "Here's one shipment of gold eagles ain't goin' to hire gunnies, pay graft an' bribes, an' help run honest cowmen off their range!" Chance swore.

He worked quickly then; worked at cheating an outfit that was anathema from Kansas to the Rio Grande; a company that was damned in Indian Territory, double-damned in Kansas, and named worse than that on Texas longhorn spreads. The syndicate—a land-grabbing, bribing, stealing octopus. Thought of it maddened Chance.

He found two small boxes on the floor behind the counter. Into these boxes he packed the gold pieces, the few bills. Into his own pocket he put but little. Little sufficed for Coss Chance. A mocking smile curving his lips, he stuffed paper in to fill the boxes to the top and keep them from jingling, wrapped them, tied them and slapped an address on each. One box went to Mobeetie; the other on to old Channing—Texas-bound.

Down there, a pair of old-timers who'd helped Chance in the past, men who'd themselves once ridden long trails and swung a county loop before they became saddle-racked and old, would now get paid for the little spreads and the dogies the syndicate had taken away. Repaying old friends, beating the syndicate, and getting the thrill of the game—this was Coss Chance, outlaw.

He took a long pull at his bottle, remembered he'd promised the clerk to set 'em up and so set the bottle down by the man's right hand.

It was typical of Chance and expressing his nature as nothing else could.

Toward noon that rainy, gray day, a stage rocked down the sloppy

road. A cow-puncher, his face plastered with mud until his features could never be realized, shoved a dozen head of steers along the road. Chance was hoping the owner of that beef would not show up until he was through with it.

He let the beef drift as he sat saddle in the path of the stage, both hands held high. The stage stopped. Chance looked up at the shotgun guard, laughed and shook his head.

"Was goin' to ship me a couple of packages from the nex' stop," he explained, riding up under the gun of the guard. "But I run across these ornery dogies on a range 'at ain't safe for 'em with the brand they're totin'."

The driver and guard chuckled. Chance joined in. He reached into his saddlebags and came up with two packages which he handed up to the driver.

"Can't take 'em in now, so I'll take 'er kindly if you'll register 'em an' send 'em on their way." He passed up a few pieces of silver.

"Heavy," the driver grunted. "Whut's in them?"

"Gun parts. Them ol' mossies down aroun' Channin' an' Mobeetie won't use nothin' but them ol'-time guns, an' they has hell gettin' parts. I bought a few ol' guns around here an' shucked off the pieces they needed."

"Syndicate keeps on," the guard growled, "they'll need cannons down there; but not half so bad as the road agent thut got the syndicate pay roll at the lay-over station this mornin'."

"You mean somebody done robbed——"

"Yeah. An'—hee-hee—left the clerk a drink to hep him up."

They drove on, leaving Chance to chase "his" steers, steers he promptly forgot when the stage was out of sight.

"I'm glad," he assured himself aloud, "Señor Granville Dodge didn't build his railroad this far over an' stages is still the way. It might not have been so easy, otherwise."

He rode on, then. And so did the stage go on, carrying the money Coss Chance had taken not many hours before. He whooped aloud at the thought of the express company's helping him get away with the cattle-syndicate's gold.

CHILLED, hungry, but still in a humor that would have forbade his trading places with the richest, most comfortable man that ever lived, Chance headed for a line camp in the hills. It was before the grazing law took hold, and the only way to run cattle on Indian Territory was to take a year or so to trail and graze them through. Some Texas outfit had leased a bit of this Cherokee Strip on which to fatten beef before running it on to Dodge.

Chance knew one of the waddies in the camp; had ridden with him out of Plemons, in Texas, not so many years gone by. The rain had stopped and a wet silence wrapped the country as in a shroud. And then, through this pressing silence, came the sudden six-gun rattle Chance well knew. He touched spurs to his horse and long-loped into a draw. The firing ahead rose to new and frenzied heights; then as suddenly ceased.

Chance broke over a ridge and raced toward the cow camp, and there, just below him, riding away from an earth-banked tent, were Butch Kelso and two others—Meech, and a one-eyed devil who refilled an empty six-gun as he rode. A puncher lay before the riddled tent, and it needed no look inside to

assure Chance that the other lay dead inside.

That was Butch Kelso's way—ride up, kill the men in the camps, and then run off the stock. It likely would be a week, or a month, before the murders, the rustling, were discovered. A cold trail, and Butch Kelso far away.

Those dead punchers at the tent—Chance had ridden with one of them, and they were his kind. And, aside from this, who in hell was Butch Kelso that he, Coss Chance, should ride aside for him? Chance rode on, straight for the bunch ahead. Naturally, trouble followed. Butch Kelso, a twisted grimace contorting his face, wheeled, and with the two others, came racing back toward Chance.

Steely-eyed, Chance skidded his horse to a sudden halt. He flipped his six-gun clear, grasped his right wrist with his left hand to brace his arm, and turned his cutter loose. Butch Kelso yelled triumphantly as he threw down on Chance. And Chance let him have it—*bam!*—between the eyes. Butch stood in his stirrups, flailed the air in the manner of one who futilely fights an aroused nest of hornets, and plunged sideways from the saddle to the ground.

Chance's gun roared again, sending mad echoes to roll and thunder in the hills. Meech was slapped back against the cantle. He grabbed his saddle horn with both hands and came straight on; passed Chance at a dead run, his eyes fixed straight ahead. The one-eyed man was sickened by this play. He croaked an oath and wheeled his horse around.

Here was no baby-faced cherub, but a gash-mouthed massacrer who handled his gun with a master's murderous touch; a man who looked as if all the gun-fight intelligence in the universe was working behind his brightly burning eyes. He flung wild and frantic shots, that one-eyed man, as he dashed away from there. And one of those wild shots scored.

Chance's right arm—his gun arm, near the biceps—throbbed with sudden burning pain. He might have killed that one-eyed man; but, instead, he lowered his gun. Coss Chance would not shoot even a rattlesnake from behind.

"I reckon," he grunted, looking wryly at the blood soaking his sleeve, "it was some worth it."

He knotted a neckerchief around his arm and drew it tight with his teeth. He grunted because of the pain of it, and then began swearing luridly as another thing occurred to him: Let Palgrin learn that he was wounded in his gun arm and it would be just too damned bad for Coss Chance.

Busted, bad luck was badgering Chance now. It bore down on him from behind. Perhaps some lawman knew Butch Kelso had taken the trail and had followed? Must have been it. Something jeered and mocked and whispered sibilantly of death as it *swushed* by, not an inch from Chance's head. That something, he knew all-fired well, was the slug from a high-powered, long-range rifle. Snarling, he slued about in the saddle.

Common sense warned Chance to high-tail yonder and waste no time. For coming toward him, flanked by his faithful pair, was Deputy Marshal Essen, who had been on Kelso's trail. Chance knew he could not argue with that lead-squirting trio. Essen would get him out here. Claim, perhaps, he'd been in with Kelso on this raid. The thing to do was to get back to Hellhaven, where Essen likely would not crow so big.

Another bullet seeking, as Chance

"You go against my orders, and I'll put a rope around your neck. Try to leave here, and the rope's around your neck just the same!"

thought, to put him under the persimmons, he leaned low and lit a shuck from there. He was taking the law to Hellhaven as he fogged it through the 'jacks.

Chance, even yet, did not realize that his luck was like an unfilled flush—plumb busted.

VI.

DOWN through hickory and oak groves, across creeks, across the Cimarron, and through the blackjacks toward Hellhaven, Chance's horse ran. It was pounding now,

wheezing badly. He turned rearward just in time to glimpse Essen and his deputies plunging over a rise half a mile away.

Chance fingered the old Spencer, shook his head and rode on. Running from the scene of a triple killing was bad. Cracking down on a deputy marshal—even a crook like Essen—was even worse. And there were Leroy and Doxie. They fought too well together, that trio. Coss Chance was not entirely a fool.

He pounded on, into Hellhaven and to a stop before the Jackoak. Here he would be safe for a spell, he figured. Long enough to explain to Essen the facts of the case. Essen surely would not cold-bloodedly drill him here in this place. So, now unworried, he stood by the hitch rack, nursed his right arm that was now stiff and swollen, and waited.

Essen, gun in hand, slid his horse to a blowing, head-down halt. Leroy and Doxie circled. Hell of a show Chance would have now! Eyes hot, teeth gleaming whitely through the mud splashed on his face, Essen leaned in his saddle.

"I was after Butch, damn you! You butt in an' stop me takin' him in. I wanted——" He shut up, snapping his lips close.

Chance knew, then, what Essen had wanted: To burn down every last one of those three, after they'd driven the cattle a distance away; get credit for killing the outlaws—and also get those cattle for his own place.

Chance shook his head. His right arm jerked with sudden and uncontrollable pain. Essen cursed crazily and let his thumb slip from the cocked hammer of his gun. It bellowed deafeningly.

Chance pawed at the hitch rail with his left hand. He sank, turning half about, pain-filled eyes dully noting the men now tumbling from the Jackoak and running up the road. He sank to his knees in the thick mud underfoot. Essen, a blind, killing rage overpowering him, making him forget that he wanted Chance as a bulwark against Palgrin, bent, thrust his gun down, and fired once more.

Chance was knocked flat on his back. He lay there staring up at Essen in a manner that gave Essen pause, and then made him wonder if he should not take aim and put another bullet squarely between Chance's bright yet filming eyes.

Blood spurted through Chance's teeth as he relaxed compression of his thin-drawn lips. His words were burbled as he croaked:

"Essen, you coyote, I couldn't have drawed on you. My right arm was stiff an' useless, drilled plumb through."

"He's lying, Essen. Let the dirty rat lie there in the mud and die like the rat he is. You took the job off my hands. I'd 'a' done it better, though, I'm thinking."

Palgrin drew back one foot as though he would kick Chance. There was a stir, a low, mongrel growl from many in the crowd. Chance was liked—as much as these outlaws could like another man. No telling what might happen if Palgrin let go that kick. They feared him now. But let them come at him as a pack, joined briefly by their common hate—— Palgrin stepped back.

Essen, too, decided it would not need another shot. He, too, doubted the advisability of throwing down on Chance again. He got closer to Leroy and Doxie and put his gun away.

Palgrin and Essen glared at each other now. A barrier had been removed. The next show-down would

be between them. Palgrin leered down at Chance. Weakly, Chance raised his head, spat blood and looked at Palgrin out of eyes now growing dim.

"Essen's a damn polecat. An' you're the same. An' the both of you can go plumb straight to hell!" His head fell back into the red-tinged mud.

Mary, sobbing, pushed through the pack, fell to her knees beside the still figure of Coss Chance. Muddy, wet through, bloody and bullet-torn, Chance, it would seem, must be dead. And wasn't—not yet.

Old Doctor, suddenly gone sober, came up and dropped beside Mary. Palgrin leaned and slapped Old Doctor's shoulder.

"Let him get his last few breaths where he is," he half advised, and half commanded. "There's no use fooling with him now."

Old Doctor turned stern, sunken eyes up to the gambler. "You may tempt me, down me with liquor," he declared; "but neither you, nor any one else above this earth's surface, can make me sink so low that I forget that I'm a doctor first of all! Somebody, if all of you aren't afraid, help me get him to my place."

They rushed to lift him, carried him down the street. Palgrin went to his shack. Essen and his deputies faded toward the leased range where Essen kept his ranch. A day or so and feeling would pass. Other killings would crop up, and other searing fires of outlaw grudges and hates would heat new irons to be bent. Off the long trails would ride new devils to this pit. Others would ride out. They would cool off and soon forget.

Down at Old Doctor's, the old man and Mary worked frantically. And up on Knave's Knoll, as dark came down, the rain started pouring once again, and sudden wind rustled the persimmon trees that had seemed so ironically emblematic and amusing to Coss Chance. Rustling branches, and bitter, acrid fruits dropping one by one upon the silent mounds below.

COSS CHANCE refused to die. And this determination against death, this obstinacy against leaving unsettled debts was furthered by Old Doctor and Mary. It was Mary's constant attention, lavished prodigally upon him, that helped the most.

In two weeks Chance could be helped to a chair by the little window in the combined kitchen, dining, and Mary's bedroom. Lines of fatigue and worry had told upon her face, yet she affected an air of gayety that Chance knew she did not feel.

She was, in a manner, more happy now, because Palgrin and Essen did not come to the house to bother her, since Chance was here. Palgrin had come, the day before, the second day Chance could sit up in the chair. He had sneered at Chance, wondered if the bulge beside Chance under the blanket over his knees was a gun, and taken himself off under the steady basilisk stare of Chance's eyes.

And because Palgrin blamed Essen for not killing Chance, blamed him for putting Chance in a position to be with Mary all the time, the feeling between the deputy marshal and Palgrin reached a tension that was steely brittle to the point of breaking. Each waited and watched for the other to make a careless overt move.

And to spite the girl, to harass and worry her, and to bring nearer that time when not even her father should interfere, Palgrin plied Old Doctor with more and more whisky.

He was gone now; would be carried back, or stagger in, to fall senseless on his cot.

Chance didn't want to talk of this. He followed Mary with eyes that were sunken and darkly circled as she worked about the room.

He said: "I'll shore have to hurry an' get well. I ain't got but a daub of money, an' I shore got to pay you for what you've done."

"You forget that!" Mary scolded. She tried to laugh, failed. She said, then: "It is pay enough to know you're getting well."

She came to sit at his feet. He wanted—as he always did—to hold her, touch her full red lips with his own. He could have, yet was withheld by the full knowledge of his own nature, and the sense that this girl gave herself in appreciation and not a real, deeper feeling than that.

"Palgrin, an' Essen. They've been botherin' you some more," Chance said.

"Yes. I go to the store, or after Dad. Palgrin looks at me like a snake at a bird it knows it will eventually seize. And Essen makes poor compliments. Dad would fight his weakness, but Palgrin urges, and Dad can't stand that. And each time he becomes easier for Palgrin to urge. When Dad loses all control, I'll——"

She shuddered.

To himself, stubbornly, Chance said: "I owe you my life. An' sometime, soon, I'm sure a-goin' to pay."

Mary sprang up. Heavy footsteps sounded on the little porch. Without knocking, then, Essen came tramping in. He stood and sneered at Chance. And somehow he fancied there was weakness, fear, in the look Chance passed him back. The starch was let out through the bullet holes in his hide, Essen reckoned.

"Chance," he said suddenly, "your day is done. I've got a United States warrant sworn out for you from Dodge. I can stick you for anything I please and make it stand. But I'm going to give you a chance. You stay in Hellhaven and behave. Stay with not another bit more shooting or trouble. Do that, I'll let you taw along. Not one shot, Chance. Not even on a claim of self-defense. You go against my orders, and I'll surely put a rope around your neck. You try to leave here, and the rope's around your neck the same."

"I—I sabe," Chance responded in a low tone. His thin face showed his contempt. "You want to help your bad rep by havin' a bad man around; one you've tamed an' are makin' come to heel, or eat outta your hand. You want me around because you've whipped me an' Palgrin ain't. Want me to aggravate Palgrin. Well, you're holdin' the whip. I can't stop you from makin' 'em pop plumb loud."

"Smart—and whipped," Essen sneered.

He turned and leered at Mary. Yes; he was taking a whack at Mary, too, to spite her for taking care of Chance. Hurting her through Chance, and showing her how much the boss he, Essen, was hereabouts. He chuckled dryly and left the two alone.

Mary, unbelieving, eyed Chance curiously, as though she was at a loss to understand the sudden, caving meekness of the man. Chance—well, not even to Mary would he bare his hopes of putting this thing even all around.

Bitter fruit, indeed! But Coss Chance knew; a man might be made to chew bitter fruit, but forcing him

to swallow it was something else again.

VII.

ENSUING DAYS furthered the meteoric fall of Coss Chance. He was hobbled by Essen. The lammers down the Long Lane savvied this. But they could not savvy that Chance let Palgrin treat him as he did. Chance hung around the Jackoak and tried friendly overtures that were met with gestures of contempt on Palgrin's part.

A little grub at the store, a few cheap drinks now and then, seemed all that Coss Chance could afford. Almost as well-known as Old Doctor did he become known around that place. A chained gunman, broken in pocket, spirit, and nerve. Or so they said.

He took long walks into the bottoms along the creek. Once, he trudged in with a sack of hickory nuts upon his back, laid them at Mary's door.

The girl cried openly when she looked at him. "Chance, oh, Chance!" she sobbed. "What have they done to you?"

"There'll be persimmons ripe when a heavy frost hits," he had said and walked away.

There was one more time. A rider coming back from Dodge City where he'd gambled, watched the trains come in, and then loped off singing, with loot from a gambling house stick-up, brought back some mail —one letter—for Mary.

"I—I got her a few pretties," he shamefacedly admitted to Chance, "an' ain't got the nerve to give them to her. You know, she come to my shack an' helped me get well, that time I had the cold. If you'd take her this letter, an' these other things for me——"

Chance took the things. He didn't intentionally look hard at the envelope of that letter that long had lain in Dodge. But a letter was an oddity to Chance. Nobody had ever written him a letter, that he could remember. He turned it over, gazing at the stamp.

The name of a man, with "Doctor" prefixing it, and the name of a town in Nebraska leaped, it seemed, off the grimy envelope and squarely into his eyes.

"He ain't forgot, either," Chance murmured. And while he felt queerly about it, somehow he felt glad at the same time.

Mary, when he handed the letter to her, tore the envelope with trembling, eager hands. And while she read, he watched; saw the far-away, eager look in her eyes; saw the hurt of her heart as things past were drawn in procession before her once again. When she looked up, Coss Chance was gone.

He, right then, was making his way in drab, desolate late sunlight to the top of Knave's Knoll. The fruit of the persimmon trees hung among nude branches, puckery, mottled, and growing brown; but not yet fit to eat. Like some lives, that fruit; had to be touched by the cutting heavy frosts of experience before they were fully ripened.

"Essen," Chance growled, "will fit 'at spot right there. An' Palgrin can bunk down beside him over there."

The whimsical smile was still on his lips—the old Coss Chance smile again—as he made his way down into the camp.

THIS TIME of day there was little trade in the Jackoak. Too, a lot of the citizens of Hellhaven were out gathering berries so as to be affluently fat for the winter's hibernation in the place. A breed Creek from the Creek Nation was having

a drink at the bar. Presently he clumped out and rode on over the Cherokee Strip to the northward of Hellhaven.

There was Old Doctor, snooted to the eyes, dozing in a chair at the rear. Palgrin played a game of solitaire at a table by himself. He showed interest when Chance hauled cash from his pocekt. Where he had made the haul, when he'd been on starvation likker and grub rations so many times before, Palgrin did not know; he cared lots less.

"Play you a friendly game uh draw," Chance offered.

Palgrin grunted and waved toward a chair. Chance wanted to haul his gun and wipe that supercilious smirk off Palgrin's heavy face. But that wouldn't be the way. He fought himself and got himself in hand enough so that he could sit still and let it ride.

From the first deal, Palgrin cheated, openly, almost, and carelessly contemptuous. Once or twice Chance looked him with wide, accusing eyes; but he said nothing. Palgrin sneered. What did he care if Chance piped up? Was not Chance a broken, beaten man? Was not he standing under a spread noose, that would drop around his neck if he made a gun play, even in self-defense?

The last crumpled bit of paper, the last piece of silver coin, went finally across the board. A pitiful enough pile it had been, too. But, it seemed, it was all to Chance. Ruefully he explained:

"I'd shore hoped to win me a little stake. I want to run, you see, even if Essen did say I must stay here. Essen, he's gone for two-three days. Buyin' up hosses somewheres. I hear he's got a saddle mare—blooded—he's bringin' back for Old Doctor's girl."

"What of it?" Palgrin demanded.

"Oh, nothin'! Only I figgered I could cut for it while he was away. But now I got no road stake at all. Nothin' to hide me out while I look around. Say! Talkin' of hosses, I got a hoss. A mighty fine hoss he is, too. Fine for a king, he'd be. Why, even a woman could ride 'im—but nothin' could outdo 'im for all of 'at."

"A woman could ride him, eh? You think Mary would like him?"

"She'd—why, she'd fall in love with him!" Chance avowed. "'At hoss is worth five-six hundred dollars. But he's too good to be choused around in a place like this, so I got him in the pasture of a pal of mine some far north of here."

"Five hundred? You crazy, yellow fool, you think——"

"But to a friend, an' because I got to have a stake to get me out of Essen's reach, he's your hoss for two hundred, Palgrin. I gotta have 'at much. It's givin' him to you."

Tensed and eager, Chance waited.

Palgrin reflected. "Mary would like him. So! And can you show me for sure he's *your* horse?"

"You know I wouldn't try no blazers like 'at on you," Chance protested. "I can go get him now, while Essen's outta town."

"All right. Go on."

Chance got up and went hurrying out as fast as he could on legs that still were not quite as strong as they should have been. Palgrin sneered after the broken-down, has-been hairpin, and reflected it was smart, hard hombres like himself that always got the biggest slice of pie.

TURNING his horse north and west, Chance headed for no man's land, that wild, ridged, broken, and sandy section toward Texas that was itself a hide-out for the lawless and

would in time become more so of the same. It pleased Chance to be riding free again. He had to grin when he thought of Essen's belief that he, Coss Chance, was held here by an open warrant and a mere command. And laughed aloud, until his horse looked reproachfully back, when he conjured up visions of how they treated him because they thought he was afraid. Not afraid. Just sensible; that was all; with debts to be paid in full.

He paid debts of gratitude always; as he had paid those old-timers at Mobeetie and Channing with the money from the outfit that had bucked them low. And he paid his lead debts the same—chunk for chunk with heaping interest.

He found a rocky ravine and a running stream toward nightfall, built a fire, and made a makeshift camp. Here for two days he would stay. He wanted it to appear that he had traveled far. With certain things settled, certain persons out of the way, Hellhaven might not be a bad place to winter in, after all. He was thinking of that when he dozed off to sleep.

He was up early next morning, made a scant breakfast, and then rode away from his camp. He kept below the sky line and rode a two-mile circle wide about the ravine. At last, satisfied he had the country to himself, he returned, opened his saddlebags and took out shells.

The crows and jays that wanted to inhabit those parts had one hell of a time that day. The crack of a six-gun stirred them off their home grounds. Single reports; double reports; long rolls that blended in one continuous blast of gunshot sound. Chance was making up for the many days of practice he had lost.

Toward evening, grinning like a happy boy, Chance was satisfied. He shoved his gun into the holster, picked up a rock and went toward a pile of brush washed up in a bend of the ravine. He hurled the rock, spun, turned on around. The white-fuzzed flag of a cottontail rabbit whipped out of the brush pile. Chance drew and fired with a snaky, continuous eye-defying move.

The rabbit leaped and bounced and was still. "Hello, Palgrin!" Chance said to the dead rabbit when he picked him up.

For a moment his face waxed harsh. He had rabbit for supper that night. Palgrin, he hoped, was better off than the rabbit; at least he would not be eaten after he was dead—if he got dead.

Chance still toyed with the elixir of that element of chance. It made life worth living and the gun-road game worth while.

HE AWOKE long before daylight, doused his face in the icy stream in the ravine, smoked a cigarette, and was on his way. He put many miles behind him before gray light came in the east. And when it was barely light enough to see, he reached the place of a friend where that wonderful horse was kept.

He took down his rope and went forward on foot. He heard sounds of ranch-yard life just over a little hill beyond the high pole fence he now approached. A rooster crowed; a milch cow bawled loudly. Chance laid aside the poles of a section of fence and slipped inside.

He moved toward the dark blots that were horses near the far side of the fence closing this little bit of pasture in. There was a drumming of hoofs on rain-soft turf as they snorted and ran from a man afoot. Chance's rope flicked out, settled.

He went rapidly away then, taking extreme care that he did not

encounter bands of cattle nor mess up with their tracks.

Coss Chance was bringing friend Palgrin back a horse.

VIII.

THAT DAY Coss Chance traveled fast. But not too fast. On three different occasions he rode onto high spots, concealed himself and his mount and the led horse and watched his back trail. Apparently satisfied, he would ride on once more.

He rode until darkness was well upon him and then stopped in a bottom where he made camp in a tangle of wild grape and oaks. He built no fire, ate a cold bite, and sat in the gloomy darkness well content with his lot. He was not lonesome; on the contrary. He chuckled to himself as he sat with his back against a tree. It would be something to treasure, to remember forever—if it worked.

A possum stirred in the grapevines above him. The white-and-black plume of a lordly skunk was held amusingly high as the little animal *pad-padded* proudly by, not many feet away; out in the blackjacks a coyote yapped feverishly as it pursued a jack rabbit. Things to think about, to hear, to see. Life to be lived. Yes; Chance was well-satisfied with his lot.

Mid-afternoon of the third day, Chance returned to Hellhaven. He timed his arrival for a period when he knew Palgrin would be napping at his shack. He rode straight to the place and called loudly for Palgrin to come out. Stupid, puffy-faced, and blinking, Palgrin came out. The sleep left his eyes, his flabby mouth dropped agape, and he jerked forward.

Coss Chance had not exaggerated when he said "his hoss" was a wonderful one. The animal he led was a chestnut. Sleek, wide between the eyes, great-barreled. Breeding that reached into blooded lines far back was shown in ever-rippling muscle under that glossy hide; was denoted in each strong proud lift of leg and toss of head. It was such a horse as many men would have fought for down to the last drop of blood in their covetous veins.

"You were gone a long time," Palgrin grunted, trying to hide his eagerness to possess this horse.

"Well, you see it was a long ways," Chance replied, his lips quirking as he thought of the day and night spent in the ravine.

Palgrin walked around the horse, unable to conceal his admiration. He inspected here and there, and Chance was elated to note that Palgrin knew next to nothing when it came to judging the fine points of a thoroughbred. Palgrin eyed shoulders and flanks.

"He isn't branded!" He studied Chance closely.

Chance appeared aghast at the mere suggestion of such an idea. He cocked his head and looked at Palgrin as though to make sure he had heard right. "Why—why you wouldn't put a iron on anything so purty!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't. never! But he is branded, Palgrin. Lookit here."

He bent the chestnut's left ear back. "It's a sorta tattoo, like the sailors have on their arms, inside the ear, Palgrin," he explained. "See this blue mark here? 'At's my mark."

"Yeh? What does it mean?" Palgrin inspected the marking.

"Nothin'. Nothin' a-tall. Jest a idea of mine, is all."

Chance looked far out across the

blackjacks. Way out yonder was a black spot that rapidly was drawing nearer, resolving itself into a running horse and rider. And then there came to view two more dots, also moving swiftly.

It could have been two men chasing hell out of another; trying to beat down on the forerunner who was all of a mile in the van. Yes; perhaps that. And, too, it might have been that these three were pards, with one in such an almighty hurry and with so much the better horse he was outriding the trailing pair.

Palgrin did not see them. All his attention was for that chestnut horse. Chance had to get action here and now.

"Try him, Palgrin," he urged. "Swing up, test his gaits, an' see jest how dog-gone wonderful he is. Maybe—uh, maybe if you'd ride by—uh, somebody's house an' let them have a look it would help you decide."

Palgrin instantly was for the suggestion. As he got his saddle and cinched it on the horse, he was laughing to himself. So Essen aimed to give Mary a pony, huh? Well, if the game had turned toward wooing the girl with gifts, Essen would be left at the start. No woman could ignore this chestnut horse.

"Ain't no use in *me* ridin' along," Chance ruefully decided when Palgrin had mounted. "Nohow; I'm sorta tired, so I'll jest wait here."

Palgrin, chest expanded, riding high, wide, and handsome, merely grunted and stepped the horse daintily away. Chance, a breathless, expectant air about him, swung to his own hull and reined around the corner of Palgrin's shack, where the foremost rider of that oncoming, racing trio would not see him.

RIDING with hand and spur, a swearing, vicious figure of a man pounded down the road, his horse's hoofs drumming on ground that still held the heavy frost of the night before. It was the first time Chance had really given that frost a thought, and as he waited by Palgrin's shack, he seemed vaguely to recollect that it should mean something to him, though he could not place just what it should mean. He rode out to the edge of the road, then, prepared for the thing he hoped would occur.

Hand on the butt of his six-gun, the racing, swearing rider that was Deputy Marshal Essen swept past the astonished Palgrin.

"You son!" Essen thundered. He romped his horse to its haunches and came around, blocking Palgrin's path.

"Gambling crooked, killing—ain't enough, huh? You try to turn horse thief—on me! You crazy coyote! You leave a trail that any pilgrim could follow. I——"

Essen's mouth closed like a snapping trap and he glared at Palgrin through eyelids that were almost closed. "By cripes!" he croaked, the idea evidently just occurring to him. "So you meant to leave a trail, eh? You want a show-down, do you? Because I've let you ride, you think I'm afraid!"

Essen bared his teeth wolfishly. "Show-down, eh?" he said coldly and menacingly.

Palgrin tensed. Essen was deliberately picking a fight. So Palgrin figured.

He snarled: "Whatinell you yapping about?"

"You don't know, I suppose," Essen roared. "Don't know that chestnut horse is mine and that I paid near a thousand for him not more than four weeks ago. You had

the guts to take him right out of the pen next to my house, too! That horse's got a mark in his left ear, you yellow tinhorn!" Essen squealed in mounting rage. "You got him to start something, and you're getting what you asked for—just entire."

"You're a damned liar!" Palgrin barked, edging the chestnut back a step. "I didn't."

Palgrin was beginning to savvy this play. Consuming hatred, fierce determination to kill Chance, flamed within him. His face twisted, his mouth worked insanely, and his arm quivered as his hand instinctively went to his gun.

To Essen, it appeared Palgrin was ready to draw. Well, he didn't need Leroy and Doxie now, anyhow. They were yet a quarter of a mile away, and the time was right now.

"You lie!" Essen bawled. And as he passed the lie he flipped his pistol free.

Essen erred. For Palgrin was the swifter of the pair. The deputy marshal swayed as the heavy report of just one gun beat above the snarled words they flung. He rose in his stirrups, shook his head, and his arms went up. He flailed the air in frantic beats as he plunged headlong to the road. He didn't move again.

"Well, well, Palgrin!"

Palgrin had never before heard a voice so mockingly taunting, so hatefully jeering, nor quite so ominous. It came from behind Palgrin, and the voice was that of Coss Chance. Chance had tricked Palgrin; had fooled them all into thinking he was a beaten man.

Every spearing throb of hate in the world concentrated in Palgrin's brain. The raw fury of hell gripped him, swayed him. He cursed soulfully and hideously as he twisted half about in his saddle. He looked straight into a pair of blue eyes that were as cold glacier ice throwing reflected rays of a midday sun. He saw a grinning yet harsh face——

"G'-by, friend Palgrin!" Coss Chance chortled.

Palgrin flung out a grating "*Awrrrr!*" and thumbed back the hammer of his gun.

Something heavy and nerve-numbing and stultifying crashed against him and through him. He was beaten back around and jammed against his saddle horn. Through wavering red fog he saw the ground. It seemed miles and miles below him. Now it was more blurred and came bouncing up to meet him as he fell and——

YELLING, brandishing their guns, Leroy and Doxie rode up too late. With that old quizzical and whimsical expression on his face, and a wisely, purposeful innocence in his eyes, Chance looked at them. He said:

"I reckon you saw how she was, fellas. Palgrin, he kilt the marshal. I was doin' my dam'dest to protect a officer. 'At's how come I shot this Palgrin down. You see how she was, don'tcha?"

Men were grouping about them. There was Old Doctor, kneeling beside men who could not use his services.

Doxie studied them. He sighed. "I ain't sure I see it *all*," he admitted. "An' I'm thinkin' there's things to this that don't nowise meet the eye. But we saw the play, an' I guess we couldn't jug you none for that. I still can't savvy, though, how Palgrin made that steal." He looked expectantly at Chance. Chance grinned and shrugged.

"Wonder if the order holdin' Chance around here still stands," Leroy muttered.

"Why, no," Chance assured him.

They looked at him, and decided that they, without more help, would not stand in his way.

Doxie laughed. "We got to save our face *some* way, Chance. So I'm orderin' you to high-tail outta here. An' see 'at Old Doctor an' Mary is given escort to the Kansas line."

"Damn right. An' glad to. We've hell enough as she stands."

Chance spread his hands, made an outward motion of being all through, picked up his reins and started on his way.

He didn't stop at Old Doctor's. He didn't want to tell Mary good-by. Something might occur to spoil his feeling of happiness over having paid Mary and Old Doctor their just debt. And Mary would be too appreciative—when he knew she hadn't forgotten that doctor man of hers. And girls like Mary, he knew, did not forget.

Well, she'd see him soon. So what was the use of stopping to say good-by?

He rode to the top of Knave's Knoll and looked at the spots he'd picked out for Essen and Palgrin. The persimmons were wrinkled and black-toned brown in color. He leaned in his saddle and picked a few. Tasted one. Now he knew, suddenly, understandingly, why it was he'd thought that frost should mean something.

The persimmons no longer were bitter, but full-flavored from the touch of that heavy frost, delicious, savory, fit for a king. Chance had stood a heavy frost in this page of his life at Hellhaven. And he found his life now like those persimmons above the graves below; graves that were but a past and a fading memory.

He rode on, out into the blackjacks. "No; I couldn't stay," he told himself, talking out loud. "The persimmons'll soon be gone, an' this country is gettin' too tame. The gamblin' ain't so good no more. An' me? Well, I'm a ring-tailed gun an' gamblin' man myse'f!"

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Just a couple of easy-goin' easy-ridin' buckaroos, lookin' for a meal. And then Miss Pansy came along, and—how they changed!

for Pansy

ALL IN ALL, "Slick" Pollock and "Vinegaron" Connors made a team that was hard to beat. Slick was dark and romantic looking, a winner with the ladies, and, it may be added, a very bad hombre in a scrap. Vinegaron, though less than half as handsome, also had a way with women and was equally tough to tangle with. He was squat, bandy-legged, and red-thatched, and whereas Slick dumbly relied on his beauty to make conquests, Vinegaron resorted to wit and a supple tongue.

It was in France that they had teamed up. At first rumor of a war each one, deluded by visions of wild cavalry charges ending in a grand round-up of the enemy, had buckled on an extra six-shooter and offered himself to his country.

But their dreams of glory had quickly faded; for Uncle Sam's foemen, blindly overlooking their unique fighting abilities, had promptly juggled them into the same hospital unit. And there, with only brief moments of relaxation given to punching the faces of members of some lucky fighting regiment who jeered at their insignia of mercy, they had scrubbed floors and made beds for some twenty long months.

Among the last to touch home soil, the disillusioned warriors tarried in civilized parts only long enough to cast off their uniforms and buy tickets for a country where men strapped six-shooters on their hips and rode to wars of their own making. At Slick's insistence, they hit for his old range in Wyoming. But disappointment awaited them there. His absence had made changes that bewildered him. The board-fronted saloon where he had once frolicked sold soft drinks. Unaccustomed fences cluttered the saged hills of Black Horse; and a rider was expected to descend from his saddle between round-ups and grasp a pitchfork.

"Are we cow-punchers or squash-bellies?" asked Vinegaron indignantly. "I've swabbed floors an' pulled sheets for a woman boss, but I ain't never got so low as to fork alfalfy for a nester. C'm'on, let's travel. I'll show you a real cow country south of the Pecos."

So they turned their horses southward to find, in time, that the land of Vinegaron's rearing had likewise gone modern. Dude outfits! Gals in britches ridin' bangtailed ponies! Autymobiles scarin' a man's hoss! Radios blarin' screechy music at you in the bunk houses!

Sadly, they wiggled their way westward over mesas and canyons. Occasionally they halted to break a few head of broncs or help brand a bunch of calves to replenish their cash. Still hopeful of finding a frontier country, they slanted across Arizona into California.

THEN, on a hot September day, they shuffled wearily up a dusty road between broad, cultivated fields. On every barn and fence there were signs. Some showed heroic riders balanced on a demon horse; others displayed fierce long-

horns being tossed skyward by gaudy-shirted bulldoggers. All bore captions informing Slick and Vinegaron that sums totaling ten thousand dollars might be earned at Solitas for duplicating those stunts.

"It's a damn lie!" declared Slick. "Whoever heard of payin' that much jack jest fer toppin' a bronc or bustin' a steer!"

"What makes you so sure?" demanded Vinegaron. "Everythin' else has gone crazy while we was gone. Mebbe good hands are shy an' prices gone up since the war. Won't hurt us none to look into it."

"Mebbe not. I'll ride all the broncs in the world for half that. Let's go."

AN HOUR later they entered a town apparently peopled by madmen. Reservation Indians, Mexicans, ranchers, tourists, sleek cowboys, milled and jostled and jabbered. Talk of champions, of wild steers, of two horses called Tiger's Fangs and Mortician, smote the wanderers' ears.

"Let's get outa this and bait the ponies and eat," said Slick, as they edged off into a side street. "I'm as gant as a winter wolf."

"We'll eat soon as we find out about this hyar rodeo bizness," returned Vinegaron, he holding the resources of the firm.

A helper at the feed yard directed them to the rodeo office. Here a supercilious clerk filled out their entry blanks and then demanded twenty dollars of them.

"I knowed it was a skin game!" Slick groaned. "I ain't a-goin' to give up no ten bucks to that shorthorn for the privilege of gettin' chounced to death on some wall-eyed pony."

"Shut your trap or he won't let us ride a-tall," growled Vinegaron. "The reason you got to pay is to keep four-flushers out, same as you have to ante in poker before the draw."

Having exchanged all but a few pennies of their available wealth for two slips of paper then, they emerged on the street.

"Now what?" demanded Slick plaintively. "It's two hull nights an' a day till we ride an' I'll be a shadder by then."

"Pull up your belt and chaw the loose end," advised Vinegaron. "You'll ride a heap easier on an empty stumick."

Hunger, however, began to gnaw cruelly. Privation, borne with fortitude on the range, was a torment in the midst of so much plenty. By evening Slick was too weak for recrimination, Vinegaron too spent to retort. Silently they slunk from the festive crowd toward the feed yard where, at least, they might share a straw bed with their horses. Startlingly, then, Vinegaron halted and stared at a dingy building across the street.

"Jest lookit there, Slick!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Jest cast your famished eyes on that."

Slick saw a faded sign beside the door and learned that "Mother" held forth there and offered clean rooms, home cooking; special rates to contestants and tourists.

"Well, what about it?" he demanded disgustedly. "I don't see our names mentioned."

"It reads that Mother lives there, an' mothers is my delight. Happens there's one ramroddin' that joint, waddy, you an' me'll eat to-night."

Grumbling his unbelief at such a miracle, Slick shuffled after him. He put on his most woebegone face and knocked. The door opened. A girl, a very pretty one, confronted them.

"Well?" she queried coldly. "What you saddle bums want?"

Hastily Vinegaron changed his pathetic look for one of intense admiration. "Me an' my buddy jett got in for the rodeo," he began in honeyed tones. "We read how your mother welcomes riders to stay, an' I hope I ain't too fresh in sayin' that if her cookin's anythin' like her daughter's looks we'll be plumb satisfied."

"I got to disappoint you," snapped the vision. "I'm the mother around this honkytonk."

Vinegaron opened his eyes wide. "What—you a mother! You so young an' purty!"

"I ain't one, an' I don't aim to be. That sign come with the house an' I got no money for a new one."

"I'm plumb relieved to hear you ain't tangled in the toils of matrimony, ma'am. Just the same I kin see that you've got all the tender, protectin' instincts of a real mother. Your face tells me that you wouldn't never turn from a man that's hungry."

"A couple of 'em," added Slick, edging closer. "Two tired vet'rans from the war-tore fields of France, come to compete for the champeenship of the world."

"Champeens is thick about here as hoss flies in August," scorned the lady. "I got a couple of 'em here right now that——"

BEFORE she completed the sentence there was a clatter of spurs descending the stairway in the hall. A harried look came into her eyes; then she drew back abruptly and slammed the door in Vinegaron's astonished face.

"Yah!" sneered Slick. "There's your tender-hearted mother!"

"Shut your yap!" returned Vinegaron. "That li'l' gal's in some trouble. Thass why she acts that way. Lissen."

He was right; there were sounds of trouble behind the door. A harsh masculine voice reached them; a faint scream; a jeering laugh.

"You'll get us in trouble of our own bustin' in on what don't consarn you," shrilled Slick.

But Vinegaron had already eased the door back and moved in.

The hallway was narrow and dimly lighted, but at the foot of the stairs in the rear, they made out the girl, her arm grasped by a big, loose-framed figure made taller by an immense Stetson. At his side stood another man, evidently expostulating.

"Onhand that lady!" commanded Vinegaron, forgetting her chill reception a few moments before.

The big man turned a scarred, truculent face and blinked his bloodshot eyes at the intruders. "You get t'hell outa here," he said at last.

Even though there had been no girl with frightened eyes present, Vinegaron's Irish would have resented that order. A very pleased smile lighted his homely features and he kept on walking. And here though he should have known better the big man made a grievous error. He waited in his cramped position until Vinegaron was close before he swung carelessly.

Vinegaron's squat body became squatter by a foot, and the hamlike fist flew over and smacked the wall. Simultaneously he stepped in, both hands playing a merry tattoo on his towering antagonist's mid-section. This had the effect of bending him and so bringing his face down within Vinegaron's reach.

A couple of smart uppercuts lifted it out of the way again, and he resumed his attack below. Down came the face once more, and there-

after Vinegaron alternated impartially between chin and midriff.

Before this, the man's companion had attempted a rescue, but at this point Slick entered the fray. His flashing attack drove the man back to the stairs. He whirled, leaped up the first three, and from that vantage tried to snatch a gun from the waistband of his tight riding breeches. As it flipped out, Slick dived, caught a foot and yanked earnestly.

The results were disastrous. The man struck on head and neck. His body followed down the steps, rolled on, feet up with the impetus of his fall. For a moment he teetered there, pawing for his lost gun; then, as Slick advanced on him, he bounced to hands and toes and flung himself madly at the open door.

As Slick turned back to Vinegaron he was in the act of bringing a rock crusher to the big man's chin. It connected and lifted him up to his toes, and when he came down it was flat on his face. Vinegaroon took a long breath.

"Help me out with this beef, Slick," he said grimly. "It fell easy, but I'm too gant to pack it alone."

By the time they had pitched the fallen warrior forth on the boardwalk he was sufficiently recovered to attempt locomotion. He cast one fearful look at his conqueror, crawled crablike a few feet, then struck a trot in the wake of his speeding comrade.

"Well," said Slick weakly, as Vinegaron made no move, "I reckon you an' me might as well be goin' along."

Vinegaron roused himself and nodded. He turned to look for his hat and found the girl in the doorway.

"I'm real grateful to you boys." She smiled tremulously, dividing her look between her rescuers. "That was Spike Gubbins an' his pardner you threw out. They're champeen bulldoggers an' reckoned to be very tough, an' they've been drunk an' pesterin' me ever since they come."

"You're not called on to thank us, ma'am," said Vinegaron gruffly. "If you'll let me have my hat now we'll travel."

"Nothin' of the kind. You'll hang your hat up while I throw you up a bite to eat."

"We're glad to've helped you," returned Vinegaron loftily, "but we wasn't lookin' for any reward."

"Howsoever," interrupted Slick, "we will stay for a bite in case them rannys take a notion to come back."

IT WAS rank libel to call what the wanderers sat down to a little later a bite. After the sharper edges of hunger had been dulled, Vinegaron's estimate of his hostess changed. He went into rhapsodies over the steak; he allowed that the biscuits were the best ever; never had he tasted such spuds nor quaffed such fine-brewed coffee. Handicapped by his partner's eloquence, Slick contented himself with sighing at each mouthful and gazing at the lady with soulful eyes.

"I'm real proud that you boys like the cookin'," the girl said humbly. "I do a lot better at my reg'lar meals, though, if I do say it myself."

"It ain't possible," demurred Vinegaron gallantly. "With a couple such feeds under my belt I'd win that champeenship easy."

"Easy as I'm eatin' this here pie," mumbled Slick.

She flushed delicately. "You boys must've thought I was sorta hard-talkin' at first. But, you know, so many has took advantage of my

feelin's—like that Gubbins. You boys is diff'rent, an' I kinda feel like trustin' you till the contest."

"You'll never regret it, ma'am," vowed Vinegaron.

"Never, ma'am," murmured Slick.

A dreamy silence prevailed as the partners prepared for rest that night. Not until the unaccustomed luxury of clean sheets infolded their tired bodies did they break their trance.

"She says her name's Pansy," whispered Vinegaron to himself. "Her mammy must've knowed she'd be purty as a flower to call her that."

"All alone an' unpertected," breathed Slick. "Her tryin' to make a livin' in this crool world by her lonesome."

THIS was the last time, however, that such perfect accord existed between them. There was a tension in the air as they ate breakfast. For the first time jealousy flamed in their breasts. Pansy accepted their adoration with a fine impartiality, her eyes dwelling on Slick's handsome countenance while she gave a willing ear to Vinegaron's flattering tongue. And so, preserving a frigid politeness toward one another, they awaited the contest.

But their hopes of gaining some advantage by their riding in the preliminaries were wasted. With their heart's desire watching, they outdid themselves. The second day's trial likewise tied them in money and honors; and on the eve of the grand finals they sat on the front steps of the house beside their goddess, eying each other with the geniality of two bulldogs.

Miss Pansy, a vision of loveliness in the pale dusk, was pensive. "To-morrow," she said, sighing, "you boys'll be leavin' me. I'll be right lonesome here without you."

"You don't have to be, *querida*," whispered Vinegaron in her left ear. "Ever since meetin' up with you I've had a longin' to settle down. If I win this prize to-morrer—which I'm bound to—I'm goin' to change; not drink an' gamble it away like some does." He glanced past her at Slick, who glared back but found himself unable to speak.

"Thass what you both ought to do," said Pansy hastily, as Slick breathed hard in her right ear. "Find you some good girl who loves you——" She left the sentence uncompleted and pressed each admirer's hand. "Now, it's gettin' late and you both need sleep to be feelin' fit for to-morrow."

"Lissen, brother," said Slick unpleasantly, after the swish of Pansy's crisp skirts faded through the door. "Since when did this hyar idee of settlin' down hit you? I've been sidin' you for two years and I don't recklect ever hearin' you mention it before."

"That's no sign that I ain't been thinkin' serious of it," retorted Vinegaron. "I've got ideels I've kep' hid from scoffers like you. It's took a sympathetic party like Miss Pansy to make me show 'em."

"And what makes you think she's so sympathetic for you? All the time she sits there so sweet and perlite listenin' to your sickenin' gab she's lookin' and smilin' at me. She jest has to lissen to you account of not wowndin' your feelin's; that's what."

Vinegaron started and regarded Slick's pure profile as though he had never seen it before. A sharp doubt assailed him. He remembered many women who had listened to his flattery and then succumbed to Slick's calf eyes.

"We both got attrackshuns," he said less confidently. "Mebbe she likes us both."

"Well, she can't marry us both," retorted Slick gruffly. "And I don't aim that you should delood the poor innercent with your smooth talk."

Vinegaron was silent for a moment. At last a crafty thought flashed. "You're plumb right, Slick," he said feelingly. "It jest ain't fair for us two to be makin' her onhappy tryin' to choose betwixt us. Tell you what. Whichever of us wins that champeenship to-morrer marries the li'l' gal. The loser ups and forks his pony without squawkin'."

Slick considered this proposition from all angles and saw no catch in it. "It's a go, Vinegaron. We let the ridin' decide. Only don't let me ketch you a-tryin' to inflooonce her behind my back."

AN ELECTRIC excitement charged the grand stand the day of the finals. There were horses with lightning in their joints and death in their hearts to be conquered; there were riders of fame and courage to meet them. But Slick and Vinegaron rode, not for money or glory, but love. Conscious of the bright eyes of Miss Pansy following them, they were unbeatable. Past title holders, piled up in the arena dust, were disqualified on points; but Slick and Vinegaron remained.

Slick drew Tiger Fangs, a demon that had permanently eliminated "Scratch 'em" Hadley, last year's winner. The killer shot from the gate, exploded like a bomb. It weaved in the air, loose-jointed as a snake, struck the ground like a falling meteor. Its screams shrilled terrifyingly at each bewildering twist.

All through the convulsion, Slick made a graceful, jaunty figure. A smile of supreme confidence curved his mouth, and his free hand waved nonchalantly at the crowd. And to make his exhibition all the more effective, Tiger Fangs made a spinning leap that brought Slick directly under Miss Pansy's eyes as the whistle sounded.

Vinegaron saw her smile and ground his teeth as he went to saddle.

If Tiger Fangs had the swift ferocity of a great cat, the famous Mortician possessed the strength and savagery of a mad buffalo. Rawboned and powerful, it pitched in deadly silence. Up, forelegs and head swung to the right, hind quarters at an acute angle to the left. Down, its twelve hundred pounds of fury striking the earth with an appalling impact. Into the air again; head and forequarters to the left, back twisted like a corkscrew, rump reversed. And atop this mangling cyclone sat Vinegaron plying his spurs, ugly, calm, and unshakable.

The whistle ended the epic conflict. A thunderous wave of applause swept the arena. The judges drew their horses aside. Their heads bobbed and nodded solemnly. Suddenly the loud speakers blared out on the stillness.

"Slick Pollock of Wyomin' and Vinegaron Connors of Texas have tied on points. Followin' the ropin' and relay races they will change hosses and ride 'em—to—a—finish!"

AS THOUGH sensing the importance of the second trial, Tiger Fangs and Mortician became fiends incarnate. Likewise the two rivals rose to heights of courage and endurance. No whistle sounded to halt the struggle this time. The seconds of nerve-shattering action piled

up to a minute, two minutes, three. Blood trickled from Slick's curved lips; the dauntless light in Vinegaron's eyes was glazed. Human fortitude was exhausted. Then the staggering outlaws flung their heads up in defeat.

Once again the judges went into a huddle. Angry murmurs and wild gestures attended the conference. At last the raucous voice of the announcer blasted the tense stillness.

"La-ay-de-es an' gen-te-elmen. An on-pree-cee-dented situation has arisen. Those peerless cowboys, Slick Pollock an' Vinegaron Connors, have contested so brilliantly that the judges are unable to decide between them. And there bein' no more hosses worthy of the talents of these soo-preme riders, they're forced to nominate them each equal and co-champeens of the wor-r-ruld!"

"Now what?" demanded Slick of the other half of his title when alone. "Since you're supposed to be equal to me, what about our proposition?"

"It's off," snarled Vinegaron. "Since I'm tagged a half champeen on account of how them fool jedges feel sorry for your baby face, I aim to go to Miss Pansy and talk for myself."

"Not without me, waddy," rejoined Slick firmly. "She's goin' to have a fair chance to look at me whilst she lissens to your blarney."

THEY found the lady in the dining room, pensive and downcast.

"Well," she said sadly, "I reckon you boys has come to say good-by. It'll be right lonesome here without you."

"No need to be, *curazon*—er—Miss Pansy," said Vinegaron tenderly. "I told you last evenin' about dreamin' of settlin' down, and all I was waitin' for was to win that title before askin' you to marry me."

"Me, too," echoed Slick. "Thass what made me ride so good to-day—so's to bring fame an' fortune ——" He filled in the gap by slipping his packet of prize money on the table.

Perceiving the strategy of the move, Vinegaron hastily added his share, sneering: "Some folks is that vulgar they got to talk about money no diff'rence how sacred is the moment, but if I'd got my rightful doos, Miss Pansy, I'd be laying all that at your feet by myself."

"Money's nothin' compared to the love of a couple of good men," said Pansy softly. "Only I like you both so much I can't hardly bear to hurt either of you by choosin' between you."

"Mebbe I've been too sudden," suggested Vinegaron. "What if we take a pasear fer a couple of hours, honey? Your heart'll get a chance to speak if"—he shot a meaning glance at Slick—"if there ain't so many distrackshuns around."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Connors! You've got such an understandin' nature to think of that." She divided her look of gratitude with Slick. "It is too big a question for a girl to be hasty, ain't it, Mr. Pollock?"

Slick nodded glumly. "All I hope, Miss Pansy, is that you decide right."

THE TIME of waiting pressed on the two lovers like a dead weight. Neither trusted the other from his sight, and they tramped the streets glowering suspiciously, chafing like two jungle beasts chained together within sight of prey.

"Hell!" growled Vinegaron, when less than half the allotted period had

gone. "I can't stand this no longer. Let's get us a drink."

The place they selected was jammed with a hilarious throng. On entering, they were recognized, and admirers at once clamored for the honor of treating. A couple of stiff hookers brightened the gloom of uncertainty; two more quickened their pulses with a glow of triumph. A half hour passed. Then some one, a loser on Slick, commiserated with him on the split decision.

"You was robbed, kid," he said thickly. "You won that ridin' fair an' square."

"I know it," declared Slick mournfully. "Had it stole from me by my own pardner."

"You're a dirty liar!" proclaimed Vinegaron, across three intervening heads.

"I'll let you prove that," shouted Slick, swinging.

The blow missed Vinegaron by two heads, landed on the third. Its owner retaliated on the nearest jaw. A bottle stood handy to the possessor of the injured jaw. He used it without hesitation or discrimination. The fight was on.

At first there was a fair alignment of pro-Slicks and pro-Vinegarons. But with no distinguishing badges, with fists flying, chairs splintering, tables overturning, the battle array of the two forces was soon broken. Then something shattered the overhead light and all partisanship vanished in a grand mêlée. Separated, so far, by their cohorts, Slick and Vinegaron had worked on the material closest at hand. But suddenly both saw an opening and sprang forward to settle their grievance personally.

Then, at the precise moment that Vinegaron started a wicked left swing toward his rival's jaw, a huge fist wielded by one of his adherents anticipated him. He saw Slick's handsome head sag as the blow rocked him, and something very like a miniature volcanic eruption took place in his own brain. He kept on going, but his left arm changed direction and caught Slick as he weaved on his feet; at the same time his right fist shot past him and smashed into the face of his astonished ally.

"C'm'on, you meddlesome bunch of coyotes," Vinegaron snarled through split lips. "I'll show you all not to mix between me an' my pardner! You, Slick! Wake up! Ol' Vinegaron's here sidin' you!"

Slick heard the words dimly, but they cleared the fog in his eyes and he caught sight of his partner's face. He puzzled an instant over its being there, then he grinned and pulled himself together to answer the familiar call to arms.

A howl of wrath from both parties greeted the union of their leaders, and, after a moment of pained surprise, all hands joined to punish the treachery. As the entire room bore in on them, prize money, titles, Pansy herself, were forgotten.

Vinegaron, ugly, squat, ferocious as a cornered wolverine, pounded and smashed his way forward. At his rear, at his flanks, in and out, flashed Slick beating off pursuers with deadly stabs. But for all their valor, the battle was only a gradual progression toward oblivion. First Vinegaron, then Slick, sank under a weight of numbers that made defeat glorious but inevitable.

THE CHILL light of a new day filtering through a barred window in Solitas' *cuartel* roused them. That is, they groaned and their eyes opened, while their minds remained shrouded in a nightmarish fog. Then a lock rattled. A bewhiskered

figure, with a badge on its chest, loomed in the door. Behind him a second man nervously fingered the trigger of a rifle.

The first man set a tray on a stool beside them, and growled: "Time you birds came alive. Get that grub in you 'cause the trial's due in half an hour."

But it was not until they found themselves transported to a dimly lighted, musty-smelling room and were jerked up before a spidery little man at a desk that things began to have any real significance. After a portentous silence, then, his voice smote their ears in recurring blasts that shook their aching heads:

"Slick Pollock and Vinegaron Connors, charged with inciting riot, wanton destruction of property, assault with homicidal intent—guilty or not guilty?"

"Say somethin'!" roared the bewhiskered man with the badge. "The court's addressin' you. Are you guilty or not?"

Realizing now that the question was directed at them, the prisoners started to take an interest in the scene. In the foreground, close to the desk, was a man they recognized as the owner of the place they had visited the night before. He looked very angry. Grouped behind him were a number of figures, their features all badly mussed and discolored but still vaguely reminiscent. Such of their eyes as were open and visible were fastened on Slick and Vinegaron vengefully.

"I reckon I'm guilty, yer honor," they each gulped in perfect unison.

Justice Cruikshank regarded them solemnly for a moment. "In view of your performances yesterday," he said at last, "I'm inclined to be lenient. Yes. I'll suspend jail sentence and fine you each ten dollars on the various counts against you. In addition, you must pay the assessed value of the property damaged during your frolic, together with the cost of this action."

"Yessir," agreed Vinegaron. "We can do that easy. Only, you see I—we ain't got our money with us. We left it with a lady for safekeepin'."

"You showed great foresight," approved the court. "Marshal, get the lady's name and address and bring us the prisoners' money."

After the marshal's departure Slick and Vinegaron relaxed somewhat. With liberty in sight, they were free to think of Pansy again. In the midst of pleasant musings, then, they became aware of the marshal's return. He brushed past them and, whispering in the court's ear, handed him a folded paper. He opened, read, and frowned over it; and suddenly Slick and Vinegaron felt a slight stir of apprehension.

"Hand this to the prisoners," ordered Justice Cruikshank, in an ominously grave tone.

SLICK stared and Vinegaron stared at the double sheet of pink note paper handed them. Their blanched lips moved soundlessly as they followed the flowing violet script with unbelieving eyes.

> DEAR FRENDS: I got so terrible lonesome after you boys left I couldn't hardly stand thinking about you. Then Mr. Gubbins—you know the good-looking gent you boys beat up—he come along and asked me to marry him so him and me went on the next train and are far away when you read this. You was both so kind and wanted me to be happy so I acepted your money for my wedding gift. Thank you, boys.
>
> Your ever grateful, loving,
>
> PANSY.

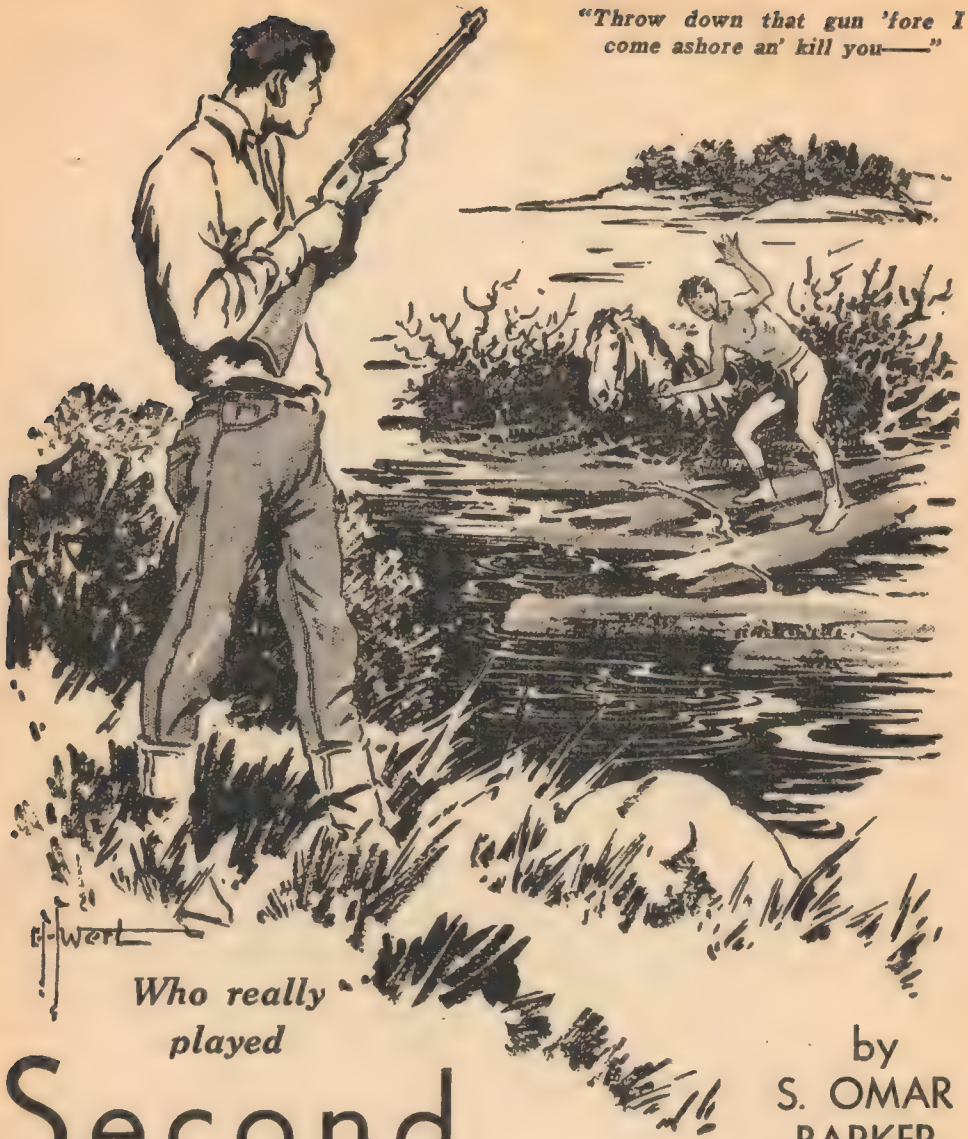
While the stricken lovers were still too stunned to do more than breathe hard, a prosperous-looking man had crossed to the desk. He conferred with the justice for a moment, then turned to the prisoners and drew an impressive-looking paper from a pocket. Unfolding it, he smoothed it out.

"Boys," he said briskly, "I have a contract here for the winners of the Solitas to ride in New York and London. Look it over, and if the terms suit you and you want to sign I'll arrange to stand for your fines."

For one short moment Vinegaron was speechless. Then he crumpled Pansy's farewell in one fist and reached for the saving contract with the other.

"Gimme a pen," he ordered. "I rode for love an' I got deceived, now I'll try ridin' for gold an' fame's unfadin' flowers."

"For gold an' fame's unfadin' flowers," echoed Slick. "But no pansies, Vinegaron."



"Throw down that gun 'fore I come ashore an' kill you——"

Who really played

Second Fiddle

in this tense story of a rivalry as turbulent in its way as the swift flood with which it is climaxed?

by S. OMAR BARKER

YOU couldn't have timed two loops to land nearer the same time, and both catch, than the ropes of "Brack" Wiley and "Nogal" Charley did on that gold-and-silver palomino called Nugget. But naturally two loops can't go over a bronc's head exactly at once. By a fraction of a second—or of an inch—Nogal Charley's got there first. Bridle in hand, Charley went

up his rope. At the palomino's head he met big Brack coming up his, also with his bridle.

Big Brack smiled. "Can't both ride him, Charley," he said. "I'll take him. Quick as I get him bridled you can slip your loop off."

"Mine's on ahead, Brack."

"Is it?" Brack spoke with easy, careless assurance as he deftly slipped Nugget's ear through the slit in the headstall of his silver-mounted bridle. "You can slip your loop off now, Charley."

"Can," said Nogal Charley, "but won't."

The look in big Brack Wiley's acorn-colored eyes showed mild surprise. He was a tophand in the Two-Two-Stairstepped outfit, and he wasn't used to having either his actions questioned or his wishes crossed. He looked down at Nogal Charley's weathered, homely face with its slightly off-center nose, its turniplike chin, its sun-faded bluish eyes, its forever chapped lips, drawn tight now in slow, stubborn anger.

"O. K., Charley." He laughed shortly. "Then *I* will."

He reached up and started to slip both loops off the palomino's neck. His own came easily enough, but Nogal Charley's jerked suddenly tight on his fingers, against the palomino's gold-colored neck. With a snort the horse reared and began to fight his head. A front hoof struck big Brack on the leg. He tried to jerk his fingers loose, but Nogal Charley set his barrel-bowed legs and lay back on the rope.

"Jerk your bridle off him, Brack!" Charley's voice was as cracked as his lips. It wasn't a voice used to giving orders—or to talking fight.

As the high-strung horse reared again, Brack managed to jerk his pinched fingers free—except for a little skin left on the rough twist of the rope. Swiftly he doubled them into a fist and whirled toward the other cowboy.

"Why, you dog-goned little brush rat," he began, "I'll——"

Charley eased up on the rope enough to quiet the horse. But he swung a loose double of it in his right hand like a shillalah, and held his ground.

Suddenly the bulky figure of Foreman Gil Blanton stepped between them.

Dog-gone my bellyband!" he boomed. "Cain't you monkeys even rope out your mounts without rousin' a dog fight? Here it is a'most sunup an' saddles still on the ground! Now cut it out!"

His glance recognized Brack Wiley's bridle on the palomino and he jumped to conclusions.

"Charley," he ordered, "get your whale line off'n Brack's hoss an' stop this here caterwaulin'!"

For half a second Nogal Charley hesitated. His mouth opened to protest, but the foreman stepped up to the palomino, slipped Charley's rope from his neck and handed the bridle reins to Brack Wiley.

Silently Nogal Charley pulled in his rope, built a new loop and bow-legged it across the rope corral to catch another mount. The rage seemed to have seeped out of him. There just wasn't a tough enough place in his heart to hold anger at the boiling point for very long. Somehow it always leaked out. But in its place, now, there was a pocket of rankling, self-abusing bitterness. He had wanted that palomino in his string and wanted him bad.

"Charley Tidmore," he told himself, "you ain't never took nothin' but the other feller's leavin's your whole dang life! You ain't nothin' but a—a danged second fiddle outta tune—an' you won't be—never!"

"Brack," Foreman Gil Blanton was remarking in his careless, booming voice as Brack Wiley saddled up, "looks like this here palomino's right smart of a hoss."

"Ain't he?" agreed Brack. "Time I've rode him a while he'll be a dinger—cuttin', ropin', drivin'—anything. That's how come me to choose him so quick—didn't want nobody else spoilin' him."

IT WAS the Two-Two-Stair-stepped's first day out with the wagon on the fall work and the remuda was fresh gathered from summer grass, as well as freshly stocked with twenty-five head of green but saddle-broke horses just bought from the V Bar N—among them the palomino that Foreman Blanton had named "Nugget" the first time he saw him.

The name was a perfect fit. Nugget was the color of unpolished gold, with silvery-white mane and tail. He was smooth, round-barreled, deep-chested, deep-necked, tapering to a trim, small-eared head held high with life and spirit.

"No thoroughbred ever helt his tail purtier," Nogal Charley had commented. "An' them eyes—gentle as a dawg's—but jest take note how he keeps 'em open! Wisht I had the dinero, I'd offer for him."

Nogal Charley had looked him over wistfully, hoping old Gil would throw the palomino into his string, but too "kinder timid" to ask. Then that first morning the foreman, always easy-going and careless about some things, instead of assigning the horses, had said:

"Let's try out them new V Bar N's to-day, boys. Ever' feller choose his pick an' if you like your first draw, he'll jest stay in your string right on."

The split of the day's riding threw the foreman and a grizzled old 'un named Jake Elherron together.

"Gil," said Jake, as they rode west from the wagon, "that there palomino—ol' Charley's noose was on him ahead of Brack's this mornin'. I seen it."

"Oh, hell," grunted Gil Blanton, "supposin' it was? He's more Brack's style o' hoss. Take a hand like Charley—a hoss is jest a hoss to him, anyhow. By to-morrow he won't give a dang. In a week he'll plumb forgit it."

But in a week Nogal Charley had not forgotten it. He wanted that palomino in his string worse than ever, for under big Brack's expert handling Nugget was already showing the "cow-savvy" and spirit that have always marked the "wonder-hosses" of the range off from the usual, everyday cow pony.

Within two weeks Nogal Charley had fixed his sights, dead aim, on one big, all-important purpose in life—to have that gold-and-silver horse, not only in his string, but for his own. Big Brack, apparently, never gave it another thought. He was used to having whatever he wanted simply by virtue of taking it. He took the permanent assignment of Nugget to his string as a matter of course, bragged some on him, of course, but blithely forgot all about the unsuccessful bid Nogal Charley had made for him that first morning out.

One day Nogal Charley, too interested in watching and envying the smooth skill of Brack Wiley and Nugget as a roping combination, let his fingers get pinched between his rope and the saddle horn with a big, bawling, fighting calf on the other end of the line.

"Dog-gone my bellyband!" snorted Foreman Blanton sarcastically, when Nogal Charley showed

him the swiftly swelling right hand. "One-handed cowboys sure is a big help on a round-up, ain't they? Whyn't you tangle that rope around your neck an' get it done with?"

"I tell you, Gil," said Nogal Charley, "young Chooper's jest a-faunchin' to bloom out into a cowhand. Reckon you might give him a try-out an' put me to jinglin' the hosses in his place, huh?"

Blanton looked at him queerly. "Mighty funny to hear a cowhand beggin' leave to wrangle hosses, Charley," he said half contemptuously, "but if that's the way your stick points, take to it."

Nogal Charley dropped back to the beginner's job of horse wrangling with surprising eagerness. The first chance he got he swiped a pocketful of sugar from the cookie's chuck box. And the first day that Nugget was not ridden but came out with the remuda, Nogal Charley went to work on him.

Off in a grassy canyon well out of sight of any of the outfit, he managed, in spite of his sore hand, to rope the palomino out of the remuda. He patted the golden neck lovingly. Gently he introduced Nugget to his first taste of sugar. He saddled him and rode him a while.

The next day he had a little feed of oats for him, swiped from the reserve sack that Foreman Blanton carried along for any horse that might get off his feed from overwork. The next day sugar again, petting, a gentle rubbing around the roots of the palomino's ears, careful, quiet handling, a little low, soothing talk, a short ride.

Within a week Nugget would come up for his treat without being roped. Nogal Charley had a way with horses.

"You're *my* hoss, ol' Nugget," he would say as the palomino's soft muzzle took the sugar in his hand, "an' don't never let nobody tell you diff'rent."

Gradually Charley taught him to shake hands.

But whenever Nugget was ridden on the work, it was still big Brack Wiley who rode him.

"WANDY" CHICOINE was as golden a girl as Nugget was a horse. She came into the Two-Two-Stair-stepped range as guide, wrangler, and general handy man for a party of archæologists—bone diggers—searching the hills for the buried ruins of long-forgotten Indian villages with their secrets of the ancient, prehistoric ways of life.

Wandy was a cowgirl, daughter of a cowman over west of the mountains, and, like most daughters of the range worthy of the name these days, she was not too proud to take an outdoor job to earn what she could while the price of cattle continued to drag bottom. Working for wages hurt neither her pride—nor her looks.

The day that Wandy Chicoine happened to come riding into the *vega* where Nogal Charley was neglecting his duties as horse wrangler to comb out carefully the silver mane of a beautiful palomino horse, both the golden-haired, blue-eyed girl and the homely, chapped-lipped cowboy fell in love—Nogal Charley with the girl, and the girl—with Nugget.

"No, ma'am," said Charley, blushing with pride at her admiration of Nugget. "I wouldn't think of sellin' this ol' pony—not to nobody. Him an' me—we're pals."

He neglected to state that Nugget was not his to sell, even if he wanted to—not even in his riding string, in fact.

"Now that we're acquainted," said Wandy Chicoine, smiling, when she got on her horse to leave, "can't you come over to our camp for a visit sometime? I get sort of tired of just bone-digger conversation all the time. An' ride Nugget, will you? I'd like to show off a real horse to my dudes. He sure is a sight for sore eyes!"

"Why—why, sure, ma'am!" Nogal Charley stammered. "Sure, we'll come!"

So she told him where the camp was and left him with a smile that just naturally let all the slack out of Nogal Charley's homely jaw and left him standing, mouth open, gazing after her, his heart pounding.

Brack Wiley rode Nugget that afternoon to cut herd on, and it was two evenings later before Nogal Charley got a chance to slip away from the wagon shortly after supper, find the remuda, swap his saddle from his wrangling pony to Nugget, and line out for a call at the bone diggers' camp. He figured it a lucky break, because Brack Wiley had not yet come in from the day's riding when he left. But when he rode up to the camp, sitting straight and proud on the high-stepping palomino, his face fresh-shaven and shiny with soap and water, he found out why. Brack Wiley was there, helping Wandy do up the supper dishes. They were laughing and talking like old friends.

"Oh, goody!" cried Wandy, swiftly drying her hands. "There's Mr. Tidmore with that beautiful horse of his! Say, Mr. Wiley, I wish you could persuade him to sell him to me. I believe I'd rather have him than anything in the world!"

Big Brack Wiley looked across at Nogal Charley stepping down off of Nugget in the rim of light beyond the camp fire, and for a brief instant he scowled. What the hell was old Charley doing here with the top horse out of his string? It was on Brack's tongue tip to speak out, then he changed his mind. He followed the girl, touched her arm gently.

"Rather have him, even, than me, Miss Wandy?" He smiled.

The girl stopped and looked up at him. Brack Wiley was not hard to look at.

"Why?" she asked. "Do you do tricks, too?"

Her tone was half sharp, half mocking, but even in the firelight her eyes smiled.

AFTER the first moment of surprised dismay, Nogal Charley acted defiantly unconcerned about Brack Wiley's presence. Gravely he bade Nugget shake hands with Wandy, and the horse obeyed. He had him pick up the hat of one of the bone-digger professors and put it on his head. Proudly, defiantly, even if fearfully, he put Brack Wiley's top-string horse through his tricks. The little audience applauded. Big Brack looked on and said nothing.

After a little while, when Wandy began to talk again about wanting to buy the palomino, Nogal Charley reckoned with uneasy bashfulness that he'd better be goin'. Big Brack went with him a little way out into the dark.

"So your idee of horse wranglin' is to make a high-school monkey out of my top horse, eh? I ought to bust you one on the nose!"

"Try it," Nogal Charley's cracked voice invited grimly. "My rope was on him first that mornin', Brack. Jest you try it!"

"By gosh, I ought to! Look here, Charley, let's get this straight: you come here sparkin' Miss Wandy?"

"Supposin' I did—who's goin' to stop me?"

"Nobody—yet. But hereafter you don't ride my horse. An' you lay off teachin' him monkey tricks, you savvy?"

"Brack," said Nogal Charley, "I'll fight you for him, fists or guns, right now—or any time you say."

"Oh, shut up an' get on back to the wagon, Charley," said big Brack, exasperated. "You're plumb hopeless!"

Nogal Charley went. But he wasn't hopeless. For the next week hope rode righer in his heart than it ever had before. True, he missed Nugget, for Brack Wiley, sent to rep as stray man for a week with the V Bar N wagon, had taken the palomino with him. But he hadn't taken Wandy Chicoine, and the wagon was staying close enough that Nogal Charley could manage, somehow, to ride up to her camp almost every evening.

It was the first time in his painfully bashful life that any pretty girl had ever been friendly enough to him to let him keep on coming to see her for a whole week. It was a wonder that Wandy did, because Nogal Charley, without Nugget to be showing off, wasn't very entertaining company. He just came, said howdy, and sat, and at last got up, said "good night, miss," and left.

He could think up plenty to say while he was away from her, but it all vanished into silent bashfulness when the time came to say it. Even so, everybody at the camp welcomed him heartily, including Wandy. It made him hopeful.

There were, in fact, but three flies in his ointment: In the first place, he missed that palomino horse—seeing him, handling him, teaching him—and it would be worse than ever when Brack came back with him, because Charley's hand was well and he was no longer jingling the remuda.

In the second place he wondered if he would ever get up enough courage to talk to Wandy Chicoine the way he wanted to.

The third thing that bothered him was the way she kept asking about big Brack. When would he be back? Wasn't he a handsome hombre, especially when mounted on that wonderful palomino? Was he really as fine a fellow as he seemed?

"Sure," Nogal Charley would answer, "ol' Brack's O. K."

He wasn't the kind to speak ill of a rival.

A COUPLE of days before Brack was due back, old man Cosland, owner of the Two-Two-Stairstepped outfit, hit the wagon for a little looksee. Nogal Charley jumped at the chance to talk to him.

"Mr. Cosland," he said, "I got a few dollars saved up, an' two months' pay comin' after this roundup. I know you don't make a practice of it, but they's a horse in the remuda I'd be mighty proud to buy from you—at your own price."

"All right, Charley," said the old man. "I jest sold one to Brack Wiley as I come by the V Bar N, an' I won't play fav'rites. Pick out your pony. I'll take a squint at him, an' we'll talk trade. If he's got the quality of that palomino I jest sold Brack, though, I warn you he'll cost you more'n any two months' wages. What's ailin' you boys, anyhow? Ain't you satisfied to ride the strings ol' Gil allows you?"

Nogal Charley's face suddenly got the forlorn look on it of a poor, starved cow critter lost in a blizzard. His rope had been on Nugget's neck first—but Brack Wiley had taken the horse that easy way he had of

always getting what he wanted. He had gone hopefully to call on the golden-haired girl at the bone diggers' camp—and Brack Wiley was there ahead of him. He had talked fight to the big, breezy cowboy—and Brack had merely ignored him. And now Brack Wiley had stepped in ahead of him and bought Nugget. All naturally, easily, as a matter of course.

"Never mind, Mr. Cosland," he said, "I reckon I ain't offerin' for no horse, after all."

"Suit yourself," said the old man.

After supper when Nogal Charley had taken his slicker and gone out to stand his night guard, old Jake Elherron and the foreman sat dozily before the fire after the rest had crawled into their soogans.

"By the gravies, Gil," said old Jake, "life sure deals mighty uneven hands, don't she?"

"Huh?" grunted Blanton.

"Well," explained old Jake, "you take ol' Brack an' ol' Charley, here. Deuces or nothin' to Charley. Aces to ol' Brack ever' time. Ever' bucket of milk comes up, ol' Brack gets the cream. It don't look hardly right he should rate that there palomino an' the gal both—but he will, won't he?"

"Sure," grunted the foreman, "an' why not? Ol' Brack's jest a borned tophand, ever' which way you look at it, Jake. He's got what-all it takes, an' Charley hain't; that's all."

ABOUT second guard it began to rain and kept it up, a hard, steady downpour all night long. Breakfast in the wet, dripping dawn was a dismal business, and it was still raining. The arroyos had begun to mutter and growl with their muddy torrents.

"She'll be floodin' the valley purty quick," grunted the foreman. "We'll need all hands to get them critters shoved up out of it. Call Charley, Jake. Roll him out."

But Nogal Charley's bed roll, snugged up under a juniper, was empty, and his saddle, gun, and slicker were gone.

Already, at the dull gray dawn, Nogal Charley was several miles away, riding, head down, against the pouring rain. His homely face was set and grim. It wasn't like Nogal Charley to quit the wagon when there was work to be done, but this time—to hell with it! Nogal Charley was riding eastward toward the V Bar N range to find Brack Wiley, and he was keeping his six-gun carefully dry.

He was talking it out to himself, planning, as he rode.

"I'll put it to him straight—first," he figured. "The horse is mine by rights, Brack, I'll tell him. But I aim to be fair. I'll pay you ever' what you paid for him, an' no hard feelin's. That's fair, Brack. But if you don't want to play it that way—well, go for your gun, Brack. My powder's dry!"

But it was not only the palomino he was thinking of. He was visioning a girl as golden as the horse—and how she would look, mounted on ol' Nugget, and him riding proudly at her side.

Nogal Charley did not have to ride clear to the V Bar N wagon to find Brack Wiley. The stray man had started home, the day before, with a drag of Two-Two-Stair-stepped strays. Charley met half a dozen of them and Brack Wiley's two extra mounts, soaked and sloggy with red, sandy mud, half a mile west of Boom-Down Canyon.

Charley looked at them, then put his horse to a heavy, slogging lope. Presently he could hear the low, sullen roar of big water in Boom-

Down Canyon. He hit the canyon at the broad crossing they called the *embudo* or funnel.

What was usually a dry, red-silted flat was now a frothy, churning sea of reddish, mud soup, streaked with the black of driftwood, dotted with little drift-piled, gravelly islands. A couple more strays struggled out over the crumbling bank as he rode down to it. Others crowded, bawling, bogging, on several of the little islands. Still others were trying to swim across the muddy torrent, bumped and knocked about by the floating drift.

Then he saw Brack Wiley, hatless, shirtless. From the waist down he was in the water, and, held up out of it a neck's length ahead of Brack, was the flare-eyed head of a horse. Mud-reddened though it was, Nogal Charley knew that head. It was Nugget. Together, horse and rider were doing their damnedest to shove a struggling cow on across the torrent.

Swiftly Nogal Charley shucked off hat, slicker, jacket, shirt, chaps, and gun. The thought of what he had come for left his mind completely. Like Brack Wiley, he was a cowboy, and here was a job to be done.

As he got back to the saddle, rope in hand, and started to force his pony down the bank, Brack Wiley saw him and yelled:

"Hey! Keep out of it, Charley! She's quicksand there! You'll drown like a rat!"

"To hell with it!" Charley yelled and plunged his horse into the torrent.

Even as they hit the water Charley saw the horse and rider out in the current bobble all at once and go under. A big length of cottonwood log, drifting toward them, struck the cow and whirled end for end where the two had disappeared.

"Look out!"

Instinctively Charley yelled it, but Brack Wiley had no chance either to hear or heed the warning. As he pawed to the surface, the drift log struck him. Charley saw him go under again. A dozen feet downstream Nugget's head showed suddenly above the water in the midst of a tangle of drifting branches. Charley saw them carrying him along, despite his valiant swimming, off downstream.

Charley's own horse hit bottom, seemed to bog for an instant, then struggled free and struck out again, swimming steadily. In grim silence Charley slanted his course toward where Brack's head showed again above the water, his hands grabbing wildly at passing driftwood.

"Hold it, Brack! I'm a-comin'!"

CHARLEY'S red-raw hands struggled to make a loop in the twisty wetness of his rope. In a few seconds he had it swinging. The loop snarled as he threw, but Brack Wiley saw it coming, kicked his body desperately high in the water and caught it.

Charley managed, somehow, to hit one of the little islands. Quick as his horse found footing, he jumped off, tied the rope fast to the horn, faced the pony toward the west bank and slapped him back into the water. Even without his rider, the pony, feeling the uncertain sand sinking swiftly under his feet, did not hesitate. In a jiffy he was swimming again, headed back toward the west bank, towing Brack Wiley at the end of the rope behind him.

Brack spat the water out of his mouth and yelled back at Nogal Charley.

"You'll bog down there, you idjit!" he shouted. "Get on some driftwood till I come back after you!"

Nogal Charley did not bother to answer. He was busy stripping to the skin. In another jiffy he tugged his feet out of the sand into the water and swam swiftly, at a cross slant downstream. Two dozen yards below he could see Nugget, still tangled in the drifting branches, fighting to free himself as the current carried him along, now high in the water, now clear under.

The palomino and the tangle of drift lodged together against a shifty pile of logs heaped up against a boulder twenty yards or so from the west bank. Almost at the same instant Brack Wiley climbed out to safety. For an instant he tottered uncertainly on his feet, then he got hold of Charley's horse, swung to the saddle and raced down the bank. He came opposite the trapped Nugget just as Nogal Charley swam to the edge of the churning drift.

Brack swung the rope, but it would not reach.

"Keep free of that drift, Charley," he yelled, "or you're sunk."

Nogal Charley heard him, but did not heed. He fought doggedly at the tangle of branches, trying to jerk them free of their entanglement with Brack Wiley's saddle. But it seemed hopeless. New drift kept lodging against them.

Suddenly Brack Wiley raced off up the bank. In a jiffy he was back, Nogal Charley's gun in his hand.

"It ain't no use, Charley!" he shouted. "You'll jest drown yourself. Git clear there, an' I'll put him out of his misery!"

Nogal Charley, around by the palomino's head, pulled himself up on a chunk of drift. His rib-bony body was directly between Nugget and the man on the bank.

"Throw down that gun!" he yelled. "I'll get him out, I tell you! Throw down that gun!"

"Look here," Brack shouted back at him. "Don't be a plumb fool! I tell you you cain't get him out! He's my horse an' I don't aim to stand here an' see him suffer! He's——"

"Throw down that gun, 'fore I come ashore an' kill you! Get you a pole, dammit, an' reach me out that rope!"

For once in his life Brack Wiley, tophand, took orders from the scrub of the outfit.

In another ten minutes they had the palomino free of the drift and towed ashore to safety. The horse was shaken, winded, bruised, but without broken bones. He was half crazed with terror, but Nogal Charley had a way with horses. Presently he got him quieted down.

One by one the cows bunched on the quicky islands were cutting loose for one bank or the other. Some of them made it, some didn't. But Brack Wiley and Charley agreed that it was useless to try to help them.

Brack got a fire started under a juniper, with the dry matches from a pocket of Charley's chaps. Nogal Charley shivered before it, wrapped in wet saddle blankets. Pretty soon, when he could control his chattering teeth, Nogal Charley spoke.

"Brack," he said, "I come out here looking fer you. I—I aim to be fair, but—but—Brack, you're sellin' me Nugget, you savvy?"

Big Brack rubbed his hands together over the fire and grinned. Then he laughed aloud. "Charley," he said. "I wouldn't sell you that horse for a cool million!"

Nogal Charley stared at him.

The speech he had rehearsed wouldn't exactly do right now, because in it he had meant to say: "Brack, go for your gun. My powder's dry!" Right now nothing was dry.

Nogal Charley dropped the blanket from his shoulders and swung a skinny wet fist at big Brack's face. It struck, glancing, on the big cowboy's chin.

Brack's big hand grabbed his arm. "Why, Charley," he said soberly, "am I such a plumb skunk as that? 'Course I won't *sell* you Nugget, not after you savin' him thataway! Don't look so dumb, feller! He's yours, savvy, *yours*—free, gratis, for nothin'! An' don't thank me or I'll shove you back in the crick!"

ON THE next Sunday Nogal Charley Tidmore in his best bib and tucker rode Nugget up to the bone diggers' camp. They were packing up to move out, and Brack Wiley was there, helping them.

Wandy Chicoine, nevertheless, came running out to greet Nogal Charley and Nugget, her blue eyes shining.

Gravely Nugget shook hands with her and nuzzled his head against her.

"Say, he's a sweet horse, Charley," she said.

For Nogal Charley it was now or never. Somehow he managed to say:

"He—he's yours, Miss Wandy—if—if you'll take me with him."

Wandy Chicoine looked at him a moment in silence. Then tears began to show in her eyes, and with them a sad little smile. She spoke as gently as she could.

"Say, Charley," she said. "I—I wish I could! You're such a peach! But"—she let her eyes drop for an instant—"but you see—well—Brack and I—say, he says you saved his life. You—you deserve *everything*. But Brack—you see, Charley, I love him!"

For an instant Nogal Charley's face had the look of a poor starved cow lost in a blizzard. Then he touched Nugget at the shoulder.

"Shake hands with Miss Wandy, Nugget," he said soberly, "an' wish her an' him happiness!"

"Anyhow," thought Nogal Charley as he rode back to trail the wagon in home to the headquarters ranch, "anyhow, I've got ol' Nugget."

But, somehow, possession of the golden palomino did not bring him the satisfaction now that he had thought it would.

Two days later Brack Wiley, busy in town getting ready for the wedding, received a surprise—a surprise that gave him, for almost the first time in his assured, tophand existence, a queer choky feeling in the throat. The surprise was a golden palomino horse. With Nugget old Jake Elherron delivered a note, laboriously scrawled in pencil:

> DEAR BRACK: Im givin you the horse. You an her. Its a weddin present. Seem like her an ol Nuggit sorter belongs together, anyhow, Brack. You be good to 'em—both.
>
> Yours truly, yr frend,
>
> NOGAL CHARLEY.

"Ain't it hell," said old Jake to Foreman Blanton when he got back to the ranch, "how some fellers always draws the aces?"

"Yeah," grunted Gil Blanton, and this time even careless Gil was thinking of Nogal Charley instead of Brack Wiley. "Some fellers is jest borned tophands, Jake!"

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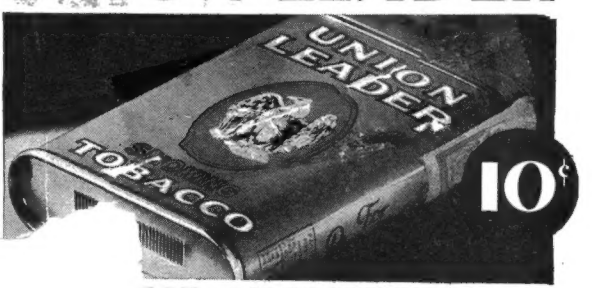

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